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August 25, 1891.

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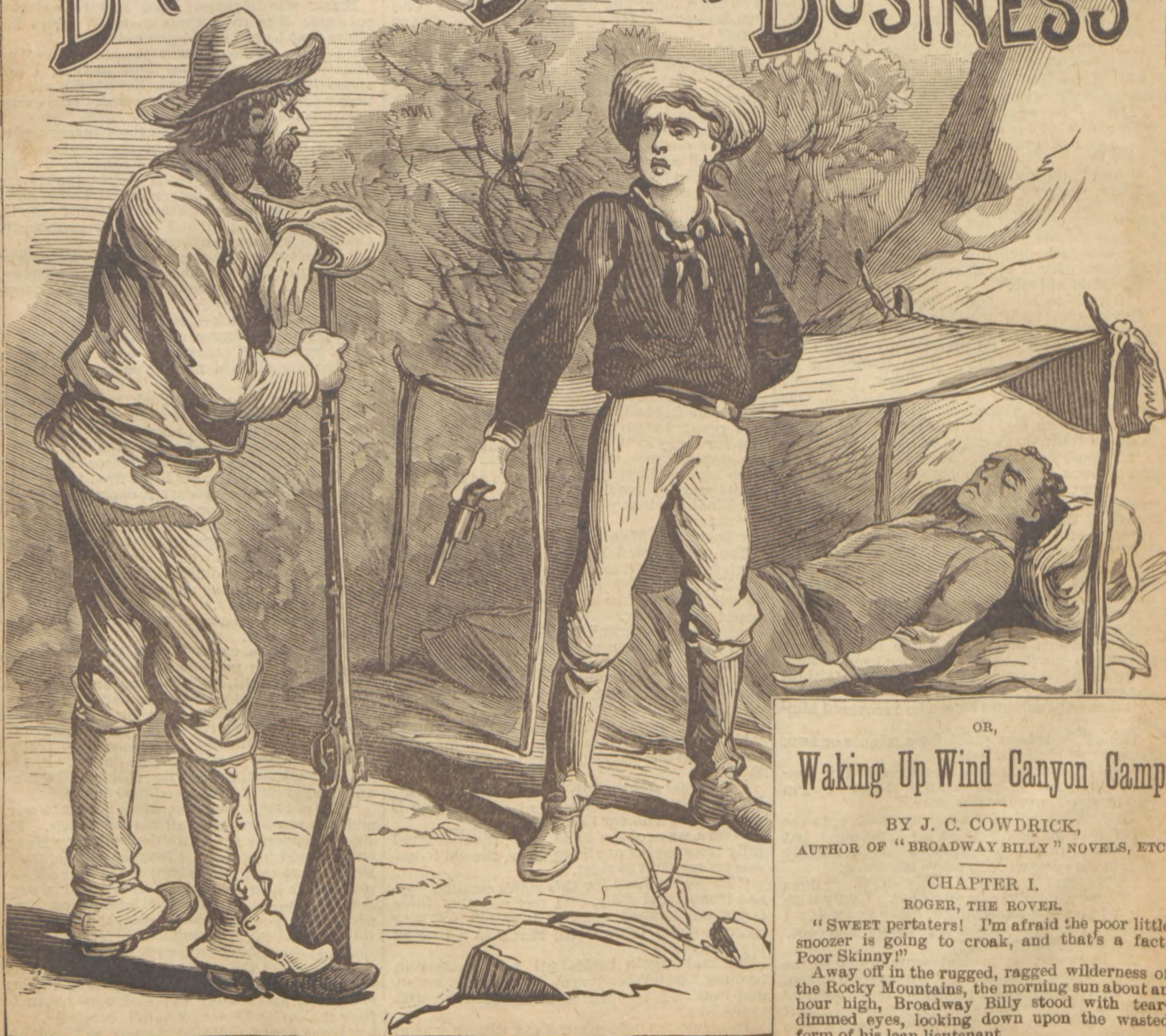
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a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXIX.

BROADWAY BILLY'S BUSINESS



"BILLY WAS UPON HIS FEET IN AN INSTANT, REVOLVER IN HAND, AS IF TO GUARD HIS SUFFERING PARD.

OR,

Waking Up Wind Canyon Camp.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ROGER, THE ROVER.

"SWEET pertaters! I'm afraid the poor little snoozer is going to croak, and that's a fact. Poor Skinny!"

Away off in the rugged, ragged wilderness of the Rocky Mountains, the morning sun about an hour high, Broadway Billy stood with tear-dimmed eyes, looking down upon the wasted form of his lean lieutenant.

It was now several weeks since their setting out from Santa Fe, and they had been roughing

it in the roughest sense of the term. Many and thrilling had been their adventures by the way, but they had pushed nobly on in the direction of Denver, and had covered full two-thirds of the distance.

But, about a week previous to the opening of our story, Skinny had been taken down suddenly with the mountain fever.

Alone together, miles upon miles from any camp, so far as they knew, they were in a bad situation. And as Skinny grew rapidly worse, the dilemma was a trying one to Billy.

And now, on this bright morning, it looked as though Skinny would not live to see the sun go down. Thin before, he was now nothing but skin and bones, and was almost too weak to move. He was delirious, too, and continually talking in a disconnected manner.

"Poor Skinny!" Billy repeated. "I only wish I had him safe home in New York. It will be awful to go home without him, leaving him buried here in an unknown place, and it will jest about kill his mother. Poor Skinny! I shall feel like a murderer, almost, for it was my fault that he came along with me. And yet I couldn't leave him behind; I love the little beggar."

It was a hard name for the faithful thin partner, but it was given in a tone of affection, and as the Broadway ex-gamin spoke the honest confession of his heart, two great tears welled from his eyes and ran down his cheeks, while his lips trembled and the "lump" rose in his throat.

Skinny was talking right ahead all the while, sometimes so as to be understood, at other times not.

"A good ways—good ways," he now muttered. "I'd go home, only for Billy; I can't leave Billy nobow. But I wish he knewed how I feel about it. Yes; you bet it's hot, pard. Hope we'll come to water before night. Reckon we'll have to go to bed hungry, Billy."

And so he went, from one thought to another; now of his secret purposes and wishes, and again of something from their past experience.

"And I did know you was gettin' homesick, Skinny, you poor little rat," said Billy to himself, "and I'd ought to be whaled half to death for not striking out for home with you before it came to this. We had no business ter undertake any such desperate trip as this one. I'm responsible for it all, Skinny, and if you die it will almost kill me."

"Awful—awful hot," muttered Skinny. "Never had such weather as this in New York, Billy. If we did, we could rely on Tony's lemonade. I'd give twenty dollars for a glass of it this minute. Billy, I want ter go home—I can't hold it in no longer. I'm jest dyin' with homesick, an' that's the fact. Oh, you can laugh if you want to, but it's no laughin' matter with me. Wish you'd fet up about my bein' thin; that's got to be a chestnut."

"I s'pose he's thinkin' about what I said to him a week or more ago, when we was swimmin' that big river," mused Billy. "That's the answer he made then, anyhow. I told him if I was as thin and light as he was, I'd walk across on the water, and so keep my feet dry. Poor little weasel! he was never as thin as he is now, and it would scare him into fits to look at himself in a glass, if he was in his right mind. And he wants to go home—poor pard! I'm afraid that's where he is goin' now, about as fast as he can—goin' to his everlastin' home!"

Of a sudden that "lump" in Billy's throat seemed to burst, and with a loud sob he sunk down upon the ground by the side of his faithful partner, weeping like a child.

It was some minutes before he recovered himself.

Skinny had been quiet for a minute or two, and now suddenly he asked:

"Billy, won't you give me a drink? I'm honestly too tired to get down and get it. I'm played clean out this time, sure."

At first Billy had looked up quickly, in the belief that Skinny was in his right mind, but the words that followed, as well as the deathly look in his eyes, went to prove otherwise.

"Give you a drink!" Billy cried. "Bless your heart, I'd give you anything. I only wish I could give you something to make you well. I suppose you are burnin' up, inside and out. Here, take this, Skinny."

As he spoke, he pressed some water to the sick lad's lips, and some of it was eagerly taken.

"Yes; I only wish I could give him somethin' that would make him well," Billy mused, "but I'm afraid it is past that now. He is a heap worse than he was yesterday, and I thought he would die then. I don't believe he is going to live till noon, and I can't shut my eyes to it."

It was indeed a trying time for Broadway Billy.

Hope seemed useless, and he was trying to bring himself to stand the shock when the end came.

"Poor little partner!" he said to himself, "how lonesome I shall be without you! And how awful it will be to bury you and leave you here all alone! And how in all creation am I going to mark the spot so as to find it again? I'll put up marks, in sight of each other, all the way to the nearest camp, if it takes me six months to do it! Your grave sha'n't be lost, little pard. But, can't somethin' be done? I wish the dear Lord would send some Good Samaritan this way now."

"And I opine he has, stranger!" Billy was upon his feet, in an instant, revolver in hand, as if to guard his suffering pard.

He had heard no sound, and this voice, so close behind him, had given him a start. But, at sight of the personage, he was reassured.

It was a man past middle age, wearing a tangle of gray hair and beard and clad in the rough dress of a mountain ranger. He had a kindly face, and was leaning on his rifle.

"That was quick done, youngster," he immediately added, "but, thar's no need ter draw weepin' onto me. I'm harmless."

Billy had already put the revolver away.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Men call me Roger the Rover," was the answer.

"Well, Roger the Rover, it does my heart good to see you, no matter who or what you are. You are a man, and one of our own kind. Can you do anything for my poor little sufferin' pard here?"

"It are dubious, my son, it are dubious indeed," the old ranger replied, with a shake of his head. "He looks so mighty wasted that I don't opine thar is much to build on. Never seen a chit so thin in my life, and yet have life in him. How long since he was taken?"

"You don't want to count too much on his thinness," answered Billy. "He wasn't much fatter when he was in the best of health. He was thin, awful thin, but now he is about at the last stage of thinness, unless he sheds his skin. Don't think I am trying to be funny, for the Lord knows I don't feel funny—not a bit. He was, really, the thinnest boy you ever saw. But he is near his end, I am afraid, as maybe you heard me saying to myself. Oh, what can I do fer him?"

"Well, if that is the case, maybe thar is a ray of hope. We'll see. We will do suthin' for him, anyhow, and if it don't do good it can't do harm, that is sartain. How long did you say it was—"

"It's just about a week since we stopped here. He felt bad, and pretty bad too, when he was ready to give up; and we thought we'd stop for a day in this place, as it was a good one for water, grass and so on; and— Well, we have kept on staying, and it looks as if Skinny would stay for good."

"What are that you call him?"

"Skinny."

"Ther name fits him now, that are sartain."

The old ranger laid down his rifle, and kneeling beside Skinny, examined him critically.

"Yer hasn't felt no sym'tums of rhis heur yerself, has yer?" he inquired, as he turned his head toward Billy.

"No; I'm all right," Billy assured.

"I guess it's ther genooine mountain. Now, you let me meander around a bit, till I find a sartain yarb that I knows of, and we'll try what virtue thar is in that. As I have said, it may do some good."

"Then for goodness' sake find it!" urged Billy. "If you can bring him out of this, old man, I'll be ready to die for you, if need be, and I mean it, too."

"I'm goin' right after it. And if you want, I'll stop with you a day or so and see how it works. We'll do our talkin' later."

With a wave of the hand, then, that debarred Billy from saying anything more, the old fellow was quickly lost to sight.

"Thank the Lord for this man's coming, anyhow!" muttered Billy. "I feel now that there is just the faintest spark of hope left for poor Skinny, and I hope it will kindle to a rousing big blaze."

He knelt again beside his frail lieutenant, bathing his forehead with the cooling water, and wetting his cracked and blackened lips with it freely.

In about ten minutes the old ranger was at his side with a bunch of some sort of green stuff in his hand.

"This heur is ther article, my son," he re-

marked, showing it. "And now we'll soon see what virtue thar is in it. We must have a fire, seein' as you have a tin cup that will do ter cook it in. It's better cooked than it are steeped an' pressed out."

"I'll have a fire in no time! You get the stuff ready. If there is any hope, let's hurry as fast as we can."

He moved in a way that proved that hope beat high in his own breast now, and as the old ranger cut the herb into short lengths and put it in the cup he looked at the young man in something of admiration.

Billy had the fire burning briskly by the time the old man was ready for it, and the cup was hung over it to simmer.

"Where are you from, my son?" the ranger then found time to ask.

Billy gave him a brief sketch of himself and Skinny, and was listened to with keen attention.

"Waal, now, you don't tell!" the ranger exclaimed, when Billy had brought his brief outline of their history down to the then present. "I never had much respect fer anything from ther East, but dig me if you ain't somethin' out of ther usual run. You are built on the right plan, you are."

"I'm glad you think so. But, isn't that stuff nearly done?"

"It is gettin' on, my son, it is gettin' on. And while it's drawin', I'll tell you somethin' about Roger the Rover."

CHAPTER II.

OLD ROGER'S STORY.

BILLY was impatient, but had to exercise patience. The ranger was so many years his senior that he had confidence in him.

"I'd like to hear about you, of course," he assented, "but you know how anxious I am about Skinny. Don't cook that stuff a minute longer than is necessary, for seems to me every breath is going to be his last."

"Trust me for that," was the assuring reply.

"It will be ready naw in a few minutes, and there's plenty of time for my short hist'ry. My name, as I have told ye, is Roger, the Rover. Anyhow, that's the only name I know now. There used to be somethin' more tacked onto it, but it's so long ago that I hardly remember it, and it don't matter anyhow."

"It ain't often that I open myself to a stranger but I ruther like you, my son, and the more so, seein' that I was 'riginally from New York myself."

"From New York—you?"

"Yes; what's strange about that?"

"It seems odd, seeing you as you are now, and hearing the odd name you bear. But, go on."

"Yes; I'm from New York, my son, but not from New York City. I never was thar in me life. I was borned and reared away up in ther north eend, and married and settled thar. I had a wife and one darter, and was reason'bly happy."

"Ther war kem on, an' I was fired ter go. My two Marys, wife and darter, opposed like sin, but my blood was up, and thar was no holdin' me. I went; and that was the last I ever seen of either of them again. It was rough, I tell you, and it made me what I am to-day."

"What was the diffikilty?" asked Billy, with an eager glance at the mess in the cup, and anxious looks at Skinny.

"Death and villainy!" was the strongly emphasized answer.

"Two of the worst things you can name, and ther last in particular," declared Billy.

"You are right, my son—you are right as a lad kin be. I had a farm, but had a morgy on it, and that morgy was held by a man named Manson. He was a reg'lar old grinder, he was, and he had a son, Dan, who wasn't no better. And that Dan was after my darter. But he couldn't git her, nobow, fer I didn't like him, and the gal liked him a good deal less."

"The old man died jest afore I went to war, and the son kem into all his belongin's. He shook the morgy at me, an' demanded my Mary, or he would foreclose. I laughed at him, for it was fixed so that jest as long as the interest was paid up, it held good fer forever and a day. And I managed to have the interest on hand every time, you kin be sure. But, thar was dark things ahead that I wasn't lookin' fer, and which knocked everything eendways."

At this point the old man paused, removed the decoction from over the fire, and taking another cup—Billy and Skinny had each one—began to pour the dark mixture off into it carefully.

"I was fired red-hot fer the war, as I said, an' was goin' to vollyteer, when who sh'ud come to my house but a feller named Higgs, and he said, said he—Rod, go to war in my place, and it will

be three hundred dollars cash into your pocket. And I said, said I, mighty quick—Higgs, I'm your man. It wasn't jest fair, mebbly, keepin' one man the more out of the ranks, but I thought of that morgy, and how fine it would be ter leave that snug leetle sum behind fer a nest-egg, so I didn't stop to worry over that p'int. I took the money, handed it to Mary, and I went to war.

"Yes; now it will do, lad, and we'll give him his first dose."

This interruption in answer to Billy's questioning look, when the medicine had all been poured into the second cup.

The first cup was cleaned out, some of the decoction was put back into it, and as soon as it was cool enough, it was poured into the poor invalid's mouth. And the dose was evidently a full one, too.

"Thar, now we'll watch ther effect of that, while I go on with my yarn, an' by ther time I'm done it's effect ought ter be seen."

"And I hope it's effect will be for the best," said Billy. "Poor little lad, he's mighty bad off."

"Well, as I was sayin'," the narrator resumed, "I went off to war. And I felt safe, with that money, and more, in Mary's hands. And I was determined to do enough fightin' fer two men, and so make it all right with my conscience. And I ruther think I done enough fer three, by dad. I was in 'most all of ther wuss scrimmages, and I kem out at last without so much as a scratch, which was a big thing to say, in them days of woe."

"I should think so."

"I wrote home as often as I could, and got some letters in answer, but at the last it got hotter than hot, I got in prison fer a spell, and connection was cut off, and I didn't hear no more till the end. And then mebbly I didn't feel a longin' fer home and ther dear ones that I'd left thar. Ever been homesick, lad? If you have, you know about how I felt. And I thought it would be nice to drop in on 'em without their knowin' I was there. So, with that idee in mind, I went the back ways, and didn't allow nobody ter know me, fer fear somehow they'd git word to Mary and so knock it in ther head."

"I'll never fergit ther feelin' I had, as I climbed ther last hill that hid ther dear old home from sight. I couldn't git to ther top half fast enough. At ther foot of ther hill, on t'other side, was—home! Did I run? Well, some! With my hat in my hand, and with tears of joy ready ter spring from my eyes. I was up that hill in no time, for I did want to see the dear old place once more, and then—my Marys!"

His voice was choking, and he leaned forward with sudden interest in Skinny.

"What is it?" asked Billy, alarmed.

"It's fer ther good, by dad!" was the exclamation. "See ther damp on him a'ready. An' he's droppin' asleep, too."

"Then you think he'll get well?" eagerly.

"I'll say he's better, an' that's a step in ther right direction, anyhow."

"I only hope he will. I'd give my right hand to have him live, if that would save him, and I mean it."

"Don't doubt it, lad, don't doubt it a bit. But, let me get on with that sad yarn of mine, and have the misery over with. I got to the top of ther hill, at last, though as I said, I wasn't no time in doin' it. And I looked over, to see ther white cottage, with its green blinds and its neat fence, and mebbe one or both of my Marys; but ther instant I looked my heart froze up as though it had been froze by a blast from ther world's end. No cottage was thar—no fence, no nothin' but a spot of black that told ther hull story—fire!"

"Waal, I sunk down right thar in ther road, as weak as ary baby, and thar I stayed, unable ter go ahead or back. I didn't dare ter go ahead, fer fear I should hear wuss news—fer somethin' seemed ter tell me thar was wuss news; an' I didn't dare go back, fer I must go on. And while I was in jest that fix, who sh'd come erlong but Clancy, the miller who lived over to the north of me. I had on my sojer rig, and he stopped and looked at me a minnit, and then he called me by name."

"I couldn't say nothin', only I jest p'inted down at ther rain, and he knowed what I wanted, and he told me all about it."

"It seemed that after I had gone, young Dan Manson had made himself a nuisance about the place, runnin' after my gal, an' as I wasn't thar ter knock him down as he deserved, he done purty much as he pleased, till at last Mary told ther neighbors and some of 'em warned him ter keep off. But he was ugly, and made threats,

and among his threats was one that if my darter didn't marry him before next interest day kem round, he would sell 'em out. But of course he was laughed at in this. Ther wimmen had ther best hand and knowed it.

"Yes, yes, son, he's a-sleepin now, sleepin' like ary baby. Cover him an' let him go inter it."

"Well, interest day kem round, and over comes young Dan fer his money. And of course wife sends Mary up ter git it, whar it's put away up-stairs. But, purty soon thar is a scream and a bump up thar, and wife runs up. Thar is Mary on the floor in a dead faint, ther empty box in her hand, but ther money—gone! There must have been a time, as I have often thought sence. Ther money gone—all gone, they couldn't pay, and Dan Manson made it hot around thar, so ther miller told. He said if Mary had a mind ter marry him, well an' good; if not, out they must go, neck an' heels. I am proud ter think they still defied him. They put him out of ther house."

"Thar was no help for 'em. They tried ter reach me, but it must 'a' been about ther time I was in prison. Ther villain he went ahead, sold 'em out, an' they had no house or home over ther heads. But, they wouldn't move. He couldn't git 'em out. And, by dad, nobody would put 'em out! They jest held onto ther place like grim death, I am tellin' ye. But about that time wife took sick, and suddenly died, and ther trouble on ther gal was more'n she could stand. She went out of her mind, and in a few months she war dead, too."

"And then, when it was too late, comes a feller what used to work for me, a sort o' half-wit, who let out that he'd seen Dan Manson enter ther house at night, by a windy. An' that jest set things a-hummin' ergain. Thar was another young feller who regarded my Mary with warm feelin', an' a smarter young man thar wasn't in ther hull county, if I do say it. He heard of this, and he played the spy on Manson till he had a clear case against him, an' then he went fore the officers and told his story. In Dan Manson's barn he had found ther very pocketbook an' money what he had stole from my poor wife an' darter!"

"Deserved to be hanged!" exclaimed Billy, in anger.

"An' I b'lieve he'd got it, too, if he hadn't scented ther smoke an' cleared out. All in one night his place an' mine went to ashes, an' that was ther last that was ever seen of Dan Manson in them parts. But he was heard of, as bein' out heur in ther wild lands of ther West, and heur I am, huntin' fer him. Son, I have tramped ten thousand miles if I have tramped one, lookin' fer that man. These gray hairs have all appeared since I set out in my hunt. And all I ask, afore I die, is ter come face ter face with him. Now you know why I'm called Roger the Rover."

Billy had listened with keen attention.

"Have you got any clew to him, that leads you this way?" he inquired, with an eye to business.

"No; I have not," was the answer. "I don't know whar he is. But somethin' seems ter tell me that I'm goin' ter find him sometime, so I keep right on rovin', and I s'pose I'll keep it up till I die."

"I'm afraid your chances are slim, though," Billy frankly commented. "It is a good many years. You would not know the man now, even were you to meet him. Still, I know how you must feel about it, and I hope you will some day get at his throat, as you ought to."

"But he is marked, my son, he is marked. On his left arm is a scar that no age will remove. He was cut with a scythe, when a lad, and thar's a hard, white seam, from elbow to wrist. When I see a man that I think might be him, I manage ter git a look at his left arm, if it takes a month of waitin'. And some day I am goin' ter see that scar. I know I am. I feel it in my bones."

CHAPTER III.

A TRYING MISFORTUNE COMES.

THE old ranger's story ended, and Billy's comments made, both turned again to Skinny, to see how it was with him.

They found him sleeping soundly under the shade of the blanket which Billy had arranged with tender care to keep off the sun. There was a marked change for the better.

"Thar's a big hope in his favor now, my son," declared the old ranger, with confidence in the assertion. "That weed is doin' its work, as I believe. Let ther pore lad sleep right on jest as long as he will, fer sleep is ther best medicine that I know of."

"I believe you are right," said Billy. "He's easier than he has been at all. It was a godsend, old man, your coming our way at this time. If ever there is a show to repay you for what you have done, you can bet your boots that Broadway Billy will not let it slip by. But, have you had anything to eat? I haven't breakfasted yet, and we'll eat together."

"Waal, my son, I have munched my strip o' jerked meat, but seein' that you have tin cups with you, an' as tin cups hints at coffee, if you have any o' that with you, I would give much fer a smack at it. It's better'n a month sence I have poked my nose into a coffee cup."

"And we've got it," Billy cried, delighted. "It won't come up to Delmonico's best, seeing that we have to take it barefooted—that is, without sugar or milk; but it will do the business for you just the same."

"Darn ther trimmin's," exclaimed the old ranger. "It are jest as good undressed, ter my way of thinkin'. This heur makes me think o' war-times, by dad it do! You don't remember them times?"

"No," Billy answered; "that diffikilty was over before I made my daboo. But I have seen 'most enough p'izen diffikilties since to make up for it."

"Ther world is full of 'em, my son. But, I have been askin' myself a question or two, an' now I opine I have answered 'em."

"What about?" Billy asked. "Mebby I kin help you out, if it is somethin' I know about."

"Was wonderin' why you stopped heur a hull week with yer sick pard, 'stead o' forgin' ahead and tryin' ter reach somewhar. But I reckons I see now how it war with ye."

"It's plain enough, when ye figger it out," Billy responded. "We stopped over here because it was the most invitin' spot we had seen in a week. And then, when Skinny was worse next day, I didn't dare ter drag him on further, for fear of not findin' water."

"Exactly. You could 'a' rigged up a drag with poles and blankets, Injun style, but you didn't know ther kentry, nor how fur from any place ye was, and was afraid ye might go further and fare wuss. It was wise ter remain heur, under them sarcumstances, I allow, my son. And now fer coffee!"

So they talked while preparing their repast, and so they continued while they ate the frugal meal.

A better camping spot could not have been found. Grove, grass, water, game, all were plentiful, and a season could have been passed there without serious disadvantage so far as food was concerned.

During the day, while they gave untiring attention to their patient, Billy and his old companion exchanged confidences in many ways, giving reminiscences of their experiences in the different paths they had trod, and a warm friendship sprung up between them.

By night there was a decided change for the better in Skinny. About dark he awoke, in his right mind, and asked for something to eat. And here the judgment of the old ranger came into play. He gave food from their scanty store of the best sort, and in best proportion to fit the needs of the case.

On the following morning Skinny was still better, and from that time his recovery was rapid. At the end of a week he was up and around, eating like a famished wolf, and his strength was rapidly returning. Billy playfully declared that he did not see where he could put so much grub, and vowed that he was going hungry himself to keep Skinny supplied.

The old ranger was in favor of their stopping there another full week, to give Skinny every chance to get beyond the danger of a relapse, and anxious as the lads were to push on, they heeded his advice and settled down to camp-life for the time required. But there seemed no danger of that, for each day saw Skinny eating more and more, and getting stronger and stronger. And the way he picked up his slight loss of flesh was astonishing.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, as he took a good survey of his lean lieutenant, at the end of the second week, "but you are gainin' amazingly. I'll bet you have got more flesh on your bones than you ever had before in your life. You look so, anyhow. What do you think about it, Roger?"

"Waal," drawled the old ranger, "he sartin'ly has more meat on him than he had when I fust met him. If he had had any less then, he wouldn't have had any a tall, and that's the fact."

"Well, to-morrow we start," announced Billy. "And I can't begin to tell how glad I am to have you with me, Skin. Do you see that green

spot over there, under the side of that big bowl-der?"

"Yes, I see it," Skinny answered.

"Well, that's the spot I had picked out in my mind for your grave, when you was so awful low."

A shudder passed over the lean lieutenant's slender form.

"You're no more pleased to have me with you, Billy, than I am to be with you, and that I can tell you," he cried.

"And I'm more'n glad ter have ye both with me," chimed in the old ranger, "seein' as we are all goin' ther same way. We'll start at daylight, and aim fer Wind Canyon Camp."

"All right, Roger; you are boss of the procession," decided Billy. "How far did you say it is to that place?"

"I guess it ain't nothin' short o' sixty miles," was the answer.

"And that means three days' travel."

"Not any less, my son, taking it easy."

"And I can stand that, I know," declared Skinny.

"Provided we have enough for you to eat, eh?" suggested Billy. "Sweet pertaters! We ought ter have a pack-mule, Skinny, and about a ton of jerked beef, so as to keep you supplied."

"Yes; you don't want to let me starve," agreed Skinny. "I want my six meals a day, as regular as the clock. Nothin' less than that will do me, in my present state of weakness. I am making up for lost time, you know."

"Making up for lost time!" Billy cried. "You made that up two or three days ago. It begins ter look as though you are fillin' up fer six months in advance. You eat more than any six men I ever saw in my life. But, go into it, thin one, and don't let me discourage you. It tickles me clear down to my toes to see you eat so."

"But it's a caution where you put it," Billy marveled. "You never weighed a hundred pounds in your life, I don't believe, but I'll bet you have got away with that many pounds of meat since you got well."

"Let him go it," put in the old ranger; "ther more he eats ther better it will suit me. It proves thar virtue of that medicine. I have never knowed it ter fail more'n a few times in my life. But, now ter bed, lad, fer sleep is ther best of all, and thar's work ter-morry."

Skinny had been treated as the baby of the trio, and had been put to bed as early as sundown, almost, and had offered little objection to it. He could sleep from ten to twelve hours straight, and never wake up once.

On this occasion the others were not long in following his example, and in a little while all were asleep.

Sometime in the night Billy was suddenly awakened by shouting, followed by the report of a firearm, and as he scrambled to his feet, scrambling for his weapons at the same time, he heard the clatter of hoofs and heard the old ranger swearing away like a trooper.

"What is it?" Billy asked, excitedly.

"Injuns!" was the fierce response.

"And the horses—"

"They has tooken 'em, slick an' clean!"

Skinny, too, was now awake and out, armed and ready to do his share of whatever was demanded.

"They must 'a' dropped onto us out of ther sky," Roger declared, after another effort at choice anathemas. "I haven't seen a single Injun sign anywhars about heur, an' I have been lookin' out fer 'em, too."

"Maybe they will sneak back and try to salt us?" suggested Billy.

"Jest as like as not," agreed the ranger, "if thar is any number of 'em and they know jest how few we are. We'll git back heur in ther shade and keep our eyes skinned fer 'em. Anyhow I will. You kin go on with yer sleepin'. It ain't no use ter go after 'em."

"And we are in a fix without our horses," remarked Skinny, as they drew back into the deeper shades under the rocks and shrubbery.

"It are bad for you, I allow," the ranger remarked, "but it don't trouble me any personally, seein' as I never straddled a hoss in my life, but wunst. That was when I was a younker. I vowed then I'd never do it again, an' I haven't. I was sent flyin' about twenty feet over a fence that time, and it cured me."

"And you can bet that we ain't goin' to give our horses up without a kick," declared Billy. "They was give to us, and we wouldn't parted with 'em fer love or money."

"You bet!" chipped in Skinny.

"I'm sorry fer ye," returned the ranger, "but I rather fear it's a dead dog. In ther

mornin' they will be too fur away fer us ter think of goin' after 'em. But we'll tell better about that when mornin' comes."

There was no sleep the rest of that night.

At dawn they ventured forth from their place to take a look around.

Over where the horses had been tethered, and in which direction the old ranger went, was found the body of an Indian.

"I knowed I didn't miss ther cuss, by dad!" the ranger cried. "Heur he are, in all his beauty, a regular coward of a hoss-thief Injun. They has come onto us unexpected in ther night, I reckon, though it's most likely they seen us earlier an' made up their minds ter have ther hosses. We'll see about that."

The old ranger looked around with practiced eye, and finally set off down the slope, telling the boys to wait and hold the fort till he got back.

He was gone about half an hour. When he returned he declared that the Indians had camped just on the opposite side of the slope, in a clump of trees, and that they must have planned to steal the horses in the night and make off without being heard.

That mattered little. The great fact was that the horses were gone, and that Billy and his slender partner were in a bad fix. They would have to walk, and Skinny was hardly in condition for that yet. Their progress must be slow, and their hardships were likely to be pretty severe. But they had Roger the Rover to rely on.

CHAPTER IV.

BILLY GETS INTO TROUBLE.

At a suggestion from Skinny, when they had made sure the enemy had gone, the first thing in order was breakfast.

That was accordingly attended to, and Skinny's appetite did not appear to be in any way affected by their severe loss. Billy mentioned this, but Skinny's retort was that he must eat the more, since he had to walk.

"And we might as well break up camp and begin ther tramp," suggested the old ranger, when the meal was ended. "Stayin' heur won't bring ther hosses back, an' we was ter set off, anyhow. An' I have noticed that ther cusses went in about ther direction we wants ter go."

"Then we'll track 'em," declared Billy. "It is jest possible that they may stop somewhere, and that we'll come upon them. And if we do—well, ther'll be a row, you bet."

"I agree with ye, lad, if thar's a show fer our money a tall. If we find no more'n four or five of 'em, by dad we'll wade into 'em, or else steal ther hosses back ergain, which I opine could be done. But, we'll see. Ther thing now is ter make ready and git started."

As things had to a great extent been prepared on the previous night, there was little to do now, and they were soon passing down the slope, leaving the scene of their temporary home forever.

When they reached the lower level, and turned in the direction in which their horses had been taken, and when they had followed the trail for a little way, the old ranger was able to decide as to the number of Indians in the band.

"Thar's only five horses in all," he declared, "an' two of 'em we know is yours. Then we know we left one good Injun at ther camp, so, accordin' to ther trail, thar is only two left; fer I don't see any signs o' any more."

"Unless some of them had no horses at the beginning," suggested Billy.

"That may be, my son, but it ain't likely. Injun and hoss is one, gen'ly, and when thar's a overplus on either side, it's gen'ly in the number o' hosses."

"And then that accounts for their not waking us up, or I mean their trying not to wake us up. They had no more force than our own, and were afraid of us. Maybe it was good for our health that there wasn't a dozen of them."

In this view the ranger agreed, and they pushed steadily forward in the direction their horses had been taken.

The first day's journey was made short, on Skinny's account, though he declared that he was good for half the distance further, and protested against stopping.

Roger the Rover ordered it, however, so stop they did. And perhaps he and Billy had found they had gone about as far as they felt like going, since they had each a saddle to carry, besides the store of provisions.

The more exercise Skinny took, the more he ate, and the more he ate the faster his strength came.

And not only so, but Billy noticed that he was

laying on flesh. He had certainly reached and passed his former weight, unless appearances were wonderfully deceiving.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy ejaculated, on the fourth day of their journey, "but you are on the gain, Skinny, sure as you are born. I really think it would be safe for you to throw away your ballast now. I don't believe the wind would waft you away, unless it blew pretty strong."

"He'd stand about as good a chance as we would in a hurricane," the old ranger remarked. "But what do ye mean by throwin' away his ballast, my son?"

"Why, he's allus been so awful thin," explained Billy, "that I had to advise him to carry a couple of buckshot in his vest pocket to enable him to keep his feet on the ground."

The old ranger laughed at this.

"I guess you need not be anxious on that score any more, my son," he said. "He is pickin' up a pound a day, if he is pickin' up a ounce."

"You mustn't believe half Billy tells you," Skinny said to him. "He is allus gettin' off some chestnut or other about my bein' thin. And as to keepin' my feet on the ground, I don't see how he keeps his own there, seeing that gas is so much lighter than air."

This turned the laugh upon Billy, and the amused old man held his sides.

"You are gettin' better, my gay an' festive little rooster," remarked Billy. "I guess the doctor needn't come to see you any more. When a fellow can eat like you do, and get off as poor a joke as that, he is out of danger."

"I'm going to give it back to you, every time," Skinny declared. "And as soon as I come to weigh as much as you do, I'm going to lick you the very first time you say a word about thinness to me."

By this time they had given up all hope of finding their horses, or the rascals who had stolen them, and had dropped the trail when it branched off in a direction they did not care to take.

A couple of days more brought them to their destination, the camp the old ranger had told them about, and at the hour of sunset they made their entrance into the place.

Wind Canyon Camp was not unlike hundreds of others of its kind. It had its rude hotel, saloons and quota of shanties. And its denizens were of the usual stamp.

"Waal, heur we be at last!" sighed the old tramp, as they set foot upon the one street of the camp.

"And glad to get here," added Billy, "though it does look like the place next to nowhere."

"You're a chronic kicker," declared Skinny. "You'd kick if you was dyin'. I am satisfied with the place, if it's only to get a square meal here."

They passed on, drawing considerable attention from those who saw them, and finally came to a halt before the hotel of the camp, the "Home Sweet Home"—as its rude sign informed.

After a glance at the exterior, they passed in. It was the usual type of border camp hotel, with the usual loungers and hangers-on scattered around the room.

Broadway Billy dropped his load of trappings in one corner, and advanced to the bar, where a man, evidently the proprietor, was looking at the three in an interested way, his elbow on the bar.

"Any chance fer board here?" Billy asked.

"Plenty of it," was the response.

"Trot out yer log-book, then, and I'll sling our handles into it for ye."

"Heur ye be," and the man handed out an almanac—and a last year's one at that, in which were some blank spaces for memoranda.

Billy felt like making comments, but choked back the words and entered the names of himself and friends, and as he handed back the pencil, which seemed to have more than usual value with his host, being probably the only one he had, remarked:

"Now, landlord, what about rates? I and my old friend here are about good average eaters, but this little shadow is a terror. He will want about six meals a day, at the rate he has been going it, with pieces to chink in with between times. I thought I'd mention this, so's there couldn't be any kick later."

The landlord took it as a joke, and laughingly said that about double rates would make it all right, he thought: and to that Billy agreed, with the further remark that if the landlord got stuck it was his own fault. And while this was going on, a fellow who had glanced at the trio with something of a start at their first appear-

ance, sidled out of the room without drawing any attention to himself.

About as soon as the registering had been attended to, Skinny put an inquiry concerning something to eat, which evidently led the landlord to believe that Billy had not been joking after all.

Supper had been over for some time, but a new supply was ordered dished up, and in a little time the three new-comers were eating the first table meal they had had in many days.

Skinny ate ravenously, and when finally he could eat no more, pushed back with a sigh, saying he was sorry his capacity was not larger.

When they were about done, they heard some loud, rough talking in the bar-room, which adjoined the kitchen and dining-room combined, in which they were eating, and rightly took it to be some rough blusterer expanding his lungs.

"Ya-as!" he was shouting, when they opened the door and stepped out into the bar-room, "they stole 'em, an' I'm bettin' rocks on it! What use is saddles without critters ter put 'em on? They stole 'em, I say, an' this heur camp wants ter take ther matter an' sift it."

He was a bad-looking man in every sense. Of middle age, he was rough, bearded and dirty, and looked to be just what he was—a bully.

Glaring around as he ended, his eyes rested upon the trio of new arrivals, and after glaring at them for a moment, as though trying to make them tremble with his awful eye, he bellowed:

"Did yer hear what yer pop said, leetle boyees?"

"I thought I heard some one whisper, answered Billy, nonchalantly.

"Thort yer heerd somebody whisper! Great sneezin' snakes! D'yer call this heur whisperin'? If yer do, ye had jest orter hear me when I scream."

"I have heard the bray of a jackass many a time," Billy retorted, as coolly as before.

The crowd in the room laughed at this, while Roger the Rover looked at Billy in alarm and Skinny turned pale.

"You mean ter call me a jackass!" the be-whiskered bully shouted. "By ther long pole, you young whelp, I've a notion to draw yer ears down under your chin an' tie 'em in a hard knot!"

"A proceedin' to which I might offer some decided objections," returned the dauntless Billy. "I haven't called you a jackass. But judging by your voice as it is, the bray of the mentioned animal must be music compared with it when you let it out full blast."

"Great curly-tailed serpents!" the bully cried, hot with rage, as he stamped around and brandished his arms. "If you wasn't a boy, darn me if I wouldn't eat you half up. You can't know who you are talkin' to, it must be. Know, tharfore, that I am Blue-hand Bart, ther Man-eater of ther Mountings! Look on me an' tremble, you poor tenderfoot."

"I am looking," Billy made answer, unheeding to the jerkings of Skinny upon his arm and the negative nods and frowns of the old ranger, "I'm looking with all the eyes I've got, but I can't get up a tremble worth a cent. Sorry if I have made you mad about anything, Mr. Man-eater, and hope you'll cool off and not get over excited. It is bad for the nerves, so I have heard."

The terror of the camp looked upon Billy in speechless amazement for a moment or two.

"Youngster," he finally said, in a subdued tone, "I don't know whar you hail from, nor who you be, but it are plain that you have had a wrong bringin' up. I'm goin' ter take ye over my knee jest wunst, ter give ye a lesson in manners. Now don't ye dare ter run away, fer if yer do I'll nigh about kill ye. Mind what I'm brayin' at ye now, ef yer think I'm a jackass."

CHAPTER V.

BLUE-HAND BACKED DOWN.

WITH that remark, the terrible Man-eater advanced toward where Broadway Billy was standing, and as he did so, the Rover took a step in advance, to get between his young friend and the man whom he had enraged; but Billy, in low tone, requested him not to interfere.

"But, he'll do ye harm," the ranger warned. "Not much he won't!" Billy assured. "Let him come!"

"Out of ther way thar, old cock," the enraged bully commanded. "Let his pop git holt onto him fer jest about one minnit, an' see if ther dust don't fly."

Somehow assured by Billy's confident tone,

the old ranger stepped aside and allowed the two to face each other.

"Come right heur," the fellow invited, and he made a reach for the delegate from New York. But, he met with a trifling surprise.

Billy had remained motionless, in a careless way; now, as that hand was outstretched, up came his own, with a brace of revolvers in their grasp.

He had the fellow covered in the neatest possible way, and had the advantage of him. It had been a lightning movement, too, a trick he had learned in Texas.

Mr. Blue-hand Bart stopped short, with his nose almost upon the deadly tubes, and his jaw dropped as his eyes flew open. Here was a surprise he had not figured on.

"I'm waitin' for ye, pop," Billy announced.

"Put up them 'ar!" the bully cried.

"Yes, when I get ready."

"You'll do it a heap afore ye git ready, if yer don't mind."

"Oh, no, I guess not. You're only joking. Your hide is full of jokes, as I can see."

"And yours will be full of somethin' else, if you don't drop them 'ar guns an' let me at ye. I'll most kill ye, if yer don't."

"And I'll full kill you, if you don't draw off and cool down," warned Billy. "I'm a game chicken from Texas, where they make men out of just such chips as I am, and if you don't want a dose, draw off."

"Yer don't mean you'd shoot?"

"Try it on, and see."

Billy's cool, sharp tone, and his flashing eyes, told the terror of the camp that he had picked up a thistle this time.

He must get out of it somehow, but how was he to do it without a clear back-down that everybody would laugh at? It was something that was not easily answered.

"Haw, haw, haw!" he suddenly broke out, with a bray of a laugh that likened him to the animal Billy had compared him to. "Yer don't know when a feller is foolin', that are plain."

"No, I don't, and that's the fact, when the other fellow acts like you do," was the retort.

"Well, I was foolin', lad. I jest wanted ter see what you was made of, that was all. Put away them 'ar things, an' we'll be friends."

"No, I don't believe we will," Billy disagreed. "You are not my sort, exactly. I'll put 'em away, though, when you step back a few feet. You're too near for comfort where you stand now."

The bully stepped back, because there was nothing else he could do; and as he did so, a snicker ran through the crowd. It was not easy to make them see the case in any other light than the right one.

Billy lowered his revolvers, and they had almost disappeared when the man's blue right hand made a jump for his belt where his own weapon was ready. But, it was a useless trick. "No you don't," Billy cried, again on the alert.

His hands were up again, with a quickness the eye could hardly follow, and his deadly pair were to the fore.

"Haw, haw, haw!" the fellow laughed, though his face did not laugh with his voice, "that 'ar was well done. I jest wanted ter see if yer could do it ergain as lightnin' quick as yer did ther fust time."

"And you're satisfied that I can?" questioned Billy.

"Perfectly satersfied, sonny. You has got it down fine. Don't believe I could do it any better myself."

This was more than the crowd could stand and not laugh outright. It let itself loose, and the laugh was loud. And this let the bully out.

Wheeling around, with a fierce scowl upon his face, he loudly demanded:

"What yer laffin' at, fools!"

A good many of the faces sobered instantly, proving that Blue-hand Bart was a man who was feared.

"What yer laffin' at, I ax yer?" he cried again. "Do yer see anything funny ter set ye off so?"

More faces straightened, and three or four who were near the door backed out of the room, to get easily out of an unpleasant situation.

As the bully put his question the second time, and glared around like some fierce tiger, there happened to be one fellow who could not hold his laughter when once it was started, and he burst out loudly.

This man's name was Grumble, a peaceable enough fellow, but one who was clearly no match for the bully in muscular power.

"You will laff, and right in me face, too, will ye?" Blue-hand shouted. "I guess I'll have ter

take ye in hand fer it, me funny galoot. I'll show ye that I ain't no laffin'-stock," and with the words the bully made a forward dash, and instantly the man's laugh was changed to a cry of alarm.

"Hold on, Bart!" he cried. "It would come out, an' it wasn't at you in partic'lar. It—"

But that was as far as he got, for the fist of the bully cut him short, and he went spinning half-way to the opposite side of the room, where he fell to the floor in a dazed condition.

"Anybody else feel like laffin'?" the bully demanded, as he glared around. "I think I kin help 'em, if thar is. Laff at Blue-hand Bart, will yer? By ther great curly-tailed serpents! I'll pulverize ther next galoot what grins."

Nobody now was even smiling.

"That's ther sort of a jackass yer pop is, sonny!" he finally declared, turning back again to Billy. "Yer kin see what sort of a show yer would of had, if I had been in 'arnest with yer. Oh, yer kin take yer hands off yer guns, fer I don't mean ye no harm."

"Glad to hear that," assured Billy, promptly. "I would hate like fun to have to make a hole in ye."

"Thar's no 'casion fer it. But you have jest seen ther sort of a man I am, an' you'll have ther good sense ter govern yerself 'cordin'ly. Don't let me have ter be in 'arnest with you."

"Oh, that won't worry me any. You will find me in earnest to meet you, every time."

"Snakes! Do yer mean ter defy me?"

"Not at all!" averred the young man. "I wouldn't think of doin' anything so rash as that."

Skinny had long since backed away, leaving Billy to his fate—as he looked upon it, but his hand was upon a ready weapon while he awaited the outcome.

And the old ranger, too, had ceased his nods and frowns, seeing that it was useless to persist further. That he felt anxious his face clearly indicated. And everybody else was looking on breathlessly.

"Then what in the name o' snakes of all kinds do yer mean?" the bully demanded.

"I mean business, right from the shoulder," was the prompt retort.

"Yer means business, hey?"

"You bet I do. When we stepped into this room, from supper, your were taking on about our saddles over there, and as much as called us thieves."

"Ho-ho! That's ther pin what sticks yer, are it?"

"That's the very pin!"

"Waal, I'm glad yer reminded me of them 'ar saddles, me lad. I believe I did say some words about ter that 'ar effect, an' mebbly you kin prove whar ye got 'em."

"That is coming back to the starting p'int," said Billy. "Where we got the saddles is my business. Nor are we going to try to prove anything about them. They are our own property, and that is all it is necessary for you to know about it."

"That's gen'ly the cry," sneered the bully.

"And now I have something to say to you, one and all," added Billy, not paying attention to that. "We have come into your camp to rest up for a few days before going further, and we want to have peace with every man of you. But you want to understand, right at the start, that we are not going to be walked on, and least of all be called thieves. Now, if you are fer peace and good will, we are, every time."

It was plain to be seen that this brief speech took with the crowd, and that Billy had their good will already.

"Better let up on the lads, Blue-hand," spoke the man behind the bar.

"And who's down onto him yet, Murt Kenyons?" the bully demanded.

"You appear to be."

"Waal, it ain't so. Hasn't ther leetle rooster been pickin' at me ever sence he made his 'pear-ance?"

"No matter about ther merits of ther case now," the proprietor returned. "I guess you kin both afford ter let it drop. You don't know anything about ther saddles anyhow, and we must take ther lad's word."

"Oh, well, I don't want to argy ther p'int," declared Blue-hand, turning away from the crowd. "I ain't got no grudge ergainst ther younker, but I think he's a leetle too waspy, an' mebbly he'll git tamed down afore he's a hundred years old. I hope he will."

With that he turned and went out, and soon after went another fellow, the same one who had sidled out of the room upon Billy's first appearance there.

The terror gone, the crowd was let free from

restraint, and men pressed around Billy, eager to grasp his hand. He had made the worst man of the camp take water, they declared.

Billy made himself agreeable to one and all, and after a time he and his two comrades retired to their room, eager to get as much rest as possible after their long walk, and anxious the more on Skinny's account. And once there, the old ranger read Billy a lecture on the folly of what he had done in making an enemy of the bully.

CHAPTER VI.

SCENTING A MYSTERY.

"SWEET pertaters! Just as if I could help it!"

So Billy complained, when the lecture ended. And he put on an injured air, one so well known to Skinny.

"But see ther danger ye have run yer neck inter," reminded the old ranger. "You have made a enemy of that feller, and he none too good ter try ter do ye harm, if he sees a chance."

"Couldn't help it," Billy stoutly declared. "It's the way I'm made up, I s'pose. I couldn't take his guff and not give some back again, not much. Besides, we are no thieves, and I won't let any man call me one, not when I can chip in my little chirp against it."

"Waal, waal, I admire yer grit, my son; and when you get a few more years on your shoulders you are going ter make a terror, if yer muscle is in keepin' with yer cool nerve, that's all."

"And I've got a little of the muscle, too," Billy boasted. "By the way, I haven't told you my age. How old do you take me to be?"

"Waal, crowdin' eighteen, I should think."

"I'll never see that again, Rover. I'm aiming for twenty-one, and I have shed my pinfeathers, every one."

"I wouldn't 'a' believed it, by dad. You don't look yer age."

"That is where lots of fellows get fooled in me. They take me for a baby, 'cause my face is so fresh and not a sign of hair on it yet. Skinny tells me that I'm never going to have any, because my cheek is too hard. But there is a pair of us, for he will never have any either, for the reason that hair don't grow on bones."

"I'm going to cover my bones," Skinny spoke up, "if my appetite holds good, and there's no sign of its going back on me yet. Wish I had a couple of pies to top off with before I go to sleep."

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy. "Let's put him to bed, Rover, or there will be a famine in this camp."

The old ranger laughed, and all prepared for sleep. And the last said was a word of warning from the old man for Billy to look out for Blue-hand Bart.

Some time in the night Billy awoke with a start, finding himself sitting bolt upright on the floor.

He and the old ranger had bunked on the floor, allowing Skinny to undress and take the softer repose of the bed, to which Skinny had objected, but was overruled.

Now Skinny was sleeping like a log, while the old ranger's merry snore was ringing out like the hum of a circular saw cutting shingles. The room was dark and not another sound was to be heard.

"I'd like ter know what woke me up," thought Billy. "It was somethin' out of the usual line," he muttered.

Just then the old ranger's snore exploded, as though the saw had struck a hard knot and broken a tooth.

"Mebby it was old Rover's trombone that brought up suddenly against an accidental sharp or flat. Or, mebbly a fly lighted on his music, and he played that, like the Dutchman I've heard of. But then, it's dark, and the old man is asleep, and his trombone is his snore; so all that don't count. What was it?"

Billy got upon his feet, silently, and listened attentively.

Nothing was to be heard, and the whole camp appeared to be in slumber. But he well knew something had awakened him.

He felt his way to the door and tried that. It was secured safely, the same as they had arranged it. He listened there, to see if any one was moving in the hall. He heard nothing that was suspicious. It puzzled him not a little.

Moving away, he went to the window.

"I know it was something," he muttered, "fer my sleep-works don't go off in that style fer nothin'. And I'd like ter know what it was."

I wish old Rover would let up on that fog horn of his fer about a minute. I'll have ter wake him, ter stop ther music, I guess."

But he didn't, yet. He drew back the strip of blanket that served as a curtain, and peered out into the street.

There all was dark, though the outlines of buildings were discernible, and nothing was moving, so far as Billy could detect. It began to be forced upon him that a dream must have awakened him, after all.

"Reckon I'll have ter own up that there is a flaw in my sleeper, after all," he said to himself. "Don't seem ter be anything goin' on that would serve ter wake me. Don't understand it. I hate ter go back ter bunk without knowin' more about it, but reckon I'll have—"

At that instant something came to his ears.

The window was open, it being warm, and was covered with only the hanging strip of blanket.

For that reason, any sound in the street would have come to his ears more readily than one within the house itself. And now from that direction a sound was plainly heard.

It was a cry, in a woman's voice, but it was hardly begun when it was cut short, as though by a hand clapped suddenly over her mouth.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, under his breath. "I knowed it. That woman has let out a scream before, and that's been what awakened me. Thar's a p'izen diffikilty a-brewin' here, and I know it. Now ther question is, who was it that let out that yelp, and why?"

As the room was dark within, he had no fear of being seen from without, so he put his head well out and watched and listened attentively.

At first there was nothing further, but presently he caught the low mutter of men's voices; then, a little later, a group of dark shadows moved along on the opposite side of the street, close together and moving silently as possible and steadily.

"That's the p'izen lot," Billy decided. "And it's dollars ter dimes that a mean skeem of some sort is afoot with 'em. Hang my sister's tomcat if I don't jest itch ter be out and after 'em!"

With the thought came the resolve.

"Is Broadway William forgettin' his business in this way? Not any! His business now is ter find out what is goin' on, and what that woman was screamin' for. And if there's any crooked business going on, bet your gum boots, that there will be a waking up in this camp."

He had taken off his boots upon retiring, and did not stop now to look for them. Besides, he could move faster without them and with less noise.

Turning, he felt his way hastily to the door, opened it with caution, and slipped out into the hall.

He had taken care to fix the plan of the overgrown shanty in his mind, on coming up to the room, and knew what direction to go to get out.

Feeling his way along the wall, he was soon at the stairs, and passing down rapidly, was quickly at the hall door—the shanty-hotel boasting a narrow apology for a hall.

A moment's quick feeling along the front of the door found two bolts, and in another moment these had been slipped, the door silently opened, and Broadway Billy was out on the street, barefooted and bareheaded, but with weapons in hand.

The shadowy forms had disappeared.

Knowing the direction in which they had gone, however, Billy sprung after them, and speedily caught up with them as near as he cared to be.

He had certainly expected to find a woman with them, a prisoner, but he was mistaken and disappointed. There were four men, and about the time when he had come as near to them as he dared approach, they stopped.

Billy stopped too, and listened.

They were near a shanty, and between that shanty and the point where Billy stood was a vacant space.

The young spy turned off at an angle, and ran swiftly as he dared run to the rear corner of the shanty, taking advantage of the darkness.

Reaching there, he advanced crouching toward the front, and in half a minute was within plain hearing of the four men, and without having been discovered by any of them.

"That's all right, Death-face," one was saying. "It was well done, and that peep wasn't heard, I guess."

"No; but ther fu'st one was a startler. Guess it didn't disturb anybody, or we'd heard some movin' 'round. Well, ther job are done, and what now?"

"Now ter bed," put in another of the four.

"That settles it, and thar's no use wastin' any more valuable time, as I kin see."

"Right you be. No use standin' heur ter chin, so let's part comp'ny and git ter roost."

A few brief words more, one to another, and they went off, each in a different direction.

"Sweet pertaters!" muttered Billy. "I'm stuck this time, fer sure. I can't foller 'em all, that's a dead certainty, unless I quarter myself, and I don't believe that would pay."

As he could follow but one, he made a hasty choice and set out after the one who retraced his steps in the direction of the hotel.

"I can hole one of 'em, anyhow," he reflected.

"And I've got a clew onto another, by the name I caught on to—Death-face, and I'll let him go. This one will be two out of the four, and that won't be bad for a two minutes' job. Won't Skinny and the old one open their eyes, when I tell 'em about this in the mornin'!"

He moved silently on, keeping his man well in sight, and finally had the satisfaction of seeing him enter a shanty some distance beyond the hotel.

"That holes him," Billy decided. "There's no chance fer mistake, unless the shanties take a crazy waltz before mornin' and get mixed up. Willyum of Broadway, the detective fever has got you again, and got you bad. You want to know somethin' about that scream, and you are going to know somethin', too, or bu'st a button off."

He stopped a moment to think, before returning to the hotel.

"If that gal wasn't killed, she must be alive yet," he mused, and as he thought he scratched his head, as though to stir up ideas.

"And if she's alive, she can't be more'n a thousand miles from here. This camp ain't New York City, not by several shanties, and it won't take me a week ter go and listen at every door in the place. Mebbly I'll hear her sobbing and sighing, if she is a prisoner."

To think was to act.

He knew about where he had heard the cry before, and adding two and two, was sure there had not been time enough for the men to have taken the girl, woman, or whatever she was, far away while he was getting out.

Crossing the street, he went from shanty to shanty, listening, but was baffled in every instance. Still he kept on, till he had finally listened at every shanty in all that part of the camp. And not a sound came from within any of them. This upset his theory, and at last he had to return to his room with the mystery unsolved. But it was with the determination to make it his business to find out what it meant before he left the camp.

CHAPTER VII.

BILLY'S KNOCK-DOWN.

THE first one awake in the morning was Skinny.

He sat up in bed, looked out at his two sleeping companions on the floor, and said to himself:

"Great ginger!" in exclamation, "if I could sleep as sound as that, I'd be happy, and I'd soon be myself again. I don't believe a brass band would wake 'em."

Quite a remarkable speech, considering that he had not been awake once during the night, and in truth had hardly moved in bed for a straight stretch of eight hours and a half.

He slipped silently out of bed, and was nearly dressed when Billy awoke.

"I thought I felt the house tremble under a heavy weight," Billy remarked, as with a yawn and a stretch he sat up.

His voice awakened the old ranger, whose snore had grown gradually less in volume as morning approached, and he, too, sat up with a gape and rubbed his eyes.

"You two fellers would sleep till noon, I reckon," complained Skinny, in a scolding tone, "if somebody didn't wake you up. Here I have been up this long time, and almost roused the whole camp tryin' to get you out."

"Get out yourself!" cried Billy. "You haven't been up a whole minute yet, as your clothes prove. What do you say, Rover?"

"It looks like it, by dad," the ranger agreed. "He ain't been up long, that is sure, or I'd been awake. It don't take but a trifle ter wake me."

"And the same with Skin, I suppose he'd say," observed Billy. "The fact is, it would take a cannon to wake either one of ye, when you get right down to business."

"Oh, you're talkin' now ter hear yerself," the ranger remarked, as, having pulled on his boots he proceeded to comb his hair with his fingers.

Billy had a quiet laugh all to himself, thinking of the surprise he had in store for them.

Broadway Billy's Business.

"What are ye grinnin' at?" asked Skinny.
"Sweet pertaters! it's enough ter make a monkey grin, ter hear you two blow about your light sleepin'. Why wasn't ye up in the night ter see the big excitement on the street?"

"Big excitement!" cried Skinny.

"You bet!"

"That don't go down," disputed the old ranger. "There warn't much noise goin' on, my son, or I would have been awake."

"Ha, ha, ha!" Billy laughed. "I have got the bulge on you this time, sure. Why, Rover, you were snoring away like a wheezy church organ, and Skin here was as dead as a log, when it was goin' on. But I was out ter see it all, you bet!"

The two looked at him in a half-shamed, half-doubtful way.

"That's purty hard ter believe," declared the old ranger. "You couldn't 'a' put on yer boots an' left this heur room 'bout my knowin' it."

"It sounds thin, and that's the fact," admitted Skinny, "but Billy don't make much noise when he wants to be still, Rover. Say, what are ye givin' us, anyhow, Billy? Is it a ghost yarn?"

Billy told his story, and proved it by the soil-stained condition of his feet.

"Lad, you are a whooper," commented the old ranger.

"That's no name fer him," averred Skinny.

"Mebby not; but it will do. I'll call him a whooper. But I'm afeerd that you will git inter trouble."

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy cried. "I'm never out of trouble longer'n a week or two at a time. I take ter trouble—or trouble takes ter me—as nat'ral as a duck takes to water. Can't keep out of it nohow. And now that the detective fever is burnin' in my veins, I expect nothin' less than that I'll get inter a peck o' trouble the first thing I know. If I do, you and Skin will have ter fish me out, that's all."

"But it's easier to keep out than it is ter git out," declared the old man.

"It's about which and t'other fer odds," said Billy. "It's jest impossible ter keep out, and it has allus been about impossible fer 'em ter keep me in. I'm a game chicken, and I manage ter come down on my feet somehow."

"Well, I hope nothin' will happen to ye, anyhow."

"So do I, and that's straight."

"But, come," cried Skinny. "What about breakfast? I'm as near starved as I ever was in my life."

"It would be funny if you wasn't," declared Billy. "I never did see such a glutton as you have got to be, Skin. You'll make your mother a pauper when you strike New York."

"Oh, no, I guess not. I'll be filled up by that time. But, I am as hungry now as two bears and a cub, and somethin' has got to be done. If breakfast ain't ready I'm going to make love to the cook, that's all."

And he was evidently in earnest, too, for he unfastened the door and went out and down.

Billy and the ranger had a little talk, and followed.

The breakfast was not ready, and, sure enough, Skinny was seen coming from the direction of the kitchen with a big slice of bread in his hands.

The trio entered the bar-room, where the proprietor, Murtagh Kenyons, was behind the bar, ready to serve the early birds of the camp to the best of his ability in his line.

"Good-mornin'!" he greeted.

All responded, and he motioned Billy to approach.

"What is it?" the New York delegate inquired, as he stepped forward to the rude bar.

"Jest a word of warnin', that's all," was the low-spoken answer. "Blue-hand Bart is going to make trouble of some sort for you and your friends. I haven't got on to jest what it is, but you must look out for him."

"Much obliged to you for the pointer," answered Billy. "I shall try to keep my eye on him, and see that he don't get the bulge on me too bad. I have an idea he is a bad man, when he means business, and no doubt he has no love for me, after last night's little rumpus."

"Not a bit of love fer ye."

"Well, I'll keep my eye skinned for him, and maybe if he picks me up for a cotton ball he'll drop me for a prickly pear. I'm not afraid of him, and he can't do me any harm unless he does the sneak act."

With that Billy turned again to his partners, telling them what had been said.

"Jest as I told you," sighed the old ranger.

"Lad, you will have ter be keeful, mighty keeful. By dad you will!"

Nothing was seen of the rampant bully, and

nothing was heard from him till some time after breakfast, when Billy and his two "pards" were standing out in front of the Home Sweet Home taking a survey of the camp.

While they were standing there, talking in low tones, trying to get through their heads something of the mystery of the previous night, the bully was seen coming toward them, in company with a score or more of others about of his own stripe.

He came up with a swaggering air, and when near at hand, stopped suddenly and pointed a finger at Billy, saying:

"Thar! Thar, Jedge Lynch, is ther young thief!"

With a single bound the sturdy, agile youth had covered the space between himself and the burly rascal, and his fist smacked him squarely upon the nose with a blow hard enough to topple him over and lay him out on his back.

"Yes, Judge Lynch," Billy retorted; "and there's the galoot that called me the name."

Billy now had his revolvers ready, and there was a defiant, what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it look upon his face.

"The personage addressed as 'Judge Lynch' was a worse-looking wretch by far than Blue-hand Bart."

"What did yer do that fer?" he fiercely demanded.

"No need to ask that," answered Billy. "You heard what he called me, didn't you?"

"Yas, I heard; an' I reckon it will go hard with yer, too. Blue-hand knowed what he was talkin' about, I opine."

"Then do you mean to back up what he said?" demanded Billy. "If you want some of the same, walk right up and get it. I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, I suppose."

"Best go slow, lad, best go slow," Roger the Rover cautioned, edging to the front, his hand on a weapon. "Thar must be some mistake, my son, an' mebbly ther gentleman will 'splain when he gits up. Don't do nothin' rash."

"No mistake on my part," cried Billy. "He called me a thief, and there he is. No mistake about it."

Blue-hand Bart was getting upon his feet by this time, and was bellowing like an angry bull.

He was called "Blue-hand" from the fact that his right hand was blue—have we mentioned it before? It had the appearance of having been burned with powder at some time or other in his career.

"No; an' thar's no mistook about what I called him, nuther!" he cried. "Put up that 'ar weepin', you young cub, till I take ye in hand an' break ye in two. And by ther Harry I mean ter do it, too!"

"Come right on and begin," Billy invited. "This is a funeral of your own beginning, and it will be one of your own finishing—in the role of corpse, if you don't keep your distance. This left hand of mine is a trifle nervous, and the finger is as likely to joggle the trigger as not."

The cowardly knave recoiled a little. Whether it was Billy's keen eyes, or whether the weapons, would have been hard to say, for while he knew the danger lay in the weapons, yet his eyes were upon Billy's.

The old ranger looked admiringly upon his young "pard," but it could be seen that he was exceedingly anxious as to what would be the outcome.

Skinny stood at Billy's side, ready to draw in his defense, if it came to a fight.

Few seconds had been consumed, so far.

"You is likely ter be hanged fer somethin' 'tirely different from either a sheep or a lamb," the fellow dubbed Judge Lynch declared.

"Well, let's hear what's the charge, then," Billy demanded. "You seem to have hatched up some sort of a raffle against me. Spit it out, and let's hear the whole thing."

"An' it's not only you, but yer pards thar, too," the ruffian went on.

"Yer hasn't nothin' ergainst me, that I'll vow," asserted the old ranger.

"Step up an' make yer charge, Blue-hand Bart," Judge Lynch called. "I kin open court heur jest as well as anywhar else."

"Ther charge are," cried the bully, who was burning with desire to be revenged upon Billy, "that these heur fellers is thieves, an' mebbly hoss-thieves, ther wu'st kind. On them 'ar saddles what they has got, under ther flaps, is ther brand an' mark of a Texas rancher. Bring 'em out an' look fer yerselves!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY'S GIGANTIC CONTRACT.

BROADWAY BILLY paled slightly in spite of himself.

Well he knew that every word was true, regarding the marks upon the saddles. They bore the brand of the Millwall Ranch.

Readers will remember that, upon their leaving Texas, Billy and Skinny had each been presented with a horse and trappings, and these were the saddles. It was not at all likely that the brand had ever been thought of.

"What has yer got ter say ter that?" the ruffianly Judge Lynch cried.

"It is straight, as straight as a string," answered Billy, coolly.

"What did I tell yer!" yelled Blue-hand. "Ther cusses desarves ter be roped right up, blast 'em!"

"Yas! Yas!"

So yelled the lackeys who had come with the bully and the judge.

"No hoss-thieves allowed in this heur camp!"

"Let's string 'em right up, old one and young tergether! That's ther easiest way ter settle it."

"Don't let your kite fly away with you," cautioned Billy, in his steady way. "It may not be as easy as you think for. If you doubt 't, try it on. Here's cold lead waiting for you, if you do."

"But yer is guilty," insisted the judge, "yer has owned to it; an' in course yer orter hang. Don't see fer my part how yer kin raise any reasonable 'bjections ter it. Drop them thar weepins, now, an' let us git ther nasty business over with soon's we kin."

Billy laughed heartily at this—could not help it.

It struck him as being about the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard in his life.

"Well, that takes the loaf," he declared. "Couldn't raise any reasonable objections to being hanged, eh? And as to owning that I am a thief—nary! Those saddles, with horses in them, were given to us when we set out from Texas. And we can prove it, too, if it comes to that."

"How can you prove it?"

"You can satisfy yourselves by writing to the man whose brand you have seen on the saddles."

"Oh, thunder, that would take too long. We wants ter do this business right up brown. We don't 'low no case ter spile on our hands, an' this one might, yer know. We wants ther proof right here an' now."

"Bet yer life we does!" echoed the bully. "Yer has got ter clear yerselves of ther charge, or up ye goes."

"Yes, I see us going, fast," sneered Billy.

"What Billy says is jest ther truth," put in Skinny.

"Yes," added the old ranger, "and I kin aver that ther lads had hosses when I fell in with 'em, an' that two whiter lads I never met in all me wanderin'."

"Then whar is them same hosses now?" cried Blue-hand.

"They were stolen from us several nights ago," answered Billy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" the bully laughed. "Them's a likely story, them is. Why wasn't ther saddles taken, too?"

"Now jest let me put in my leetle say right heur," quickly took up the old ranger. "I was with ther lads when that happened, an' I know all about it. They was taken off by a party o' Injuns, an' one o' them same Injuns kem ter his end by a bullet from my old gun. That I'll swar to."

"There you have it, straight," declared Billy.

"But wouldn't they lie for each other?" cried Blue-hand. "Course they would, an' that's what they is doin'. Now I hev give ye ther proof, fellers, an' it is your business ter see that they is hanged, 'thout any p'laver about it."

"And it's my business to see that I don't get hanged," chipped in Billy. "I can make it interesting for some of you, if you try it on. There will be some vacant lodges in this howling wilderness, and don't you forget it. You are about the worst set of p'izen cut-throats that I ever encountered."

Billy's "mad" was up, and he little cared what he said.

"We'll show you!" screamed the smarting bully, whose nose had swollen to half again its natural size. "How many is in favor of their swingin', boyees?"

"All of us!" cried a voice in the gang.

"Yas! Yas!"

"Well, then, go ahead with the job," Billy invited.

But there was the rub. Billy and his partners looked to be a bristly trio to tackle, and there was an awkward pause.

Now by this time quite a crowd had gathered around, and among the lot, many who rather sided with the boys and their old friend. And

among these was one man whose appearance Billy rather liked.

This was a young man of twenty-eight or so, with a clear, bold face, and keen, blue eyes. He was neatly clad, and was far ahead of any other personage in the crowd in personal appearance. He had been there but a moment, and now he let his voice be heard.

"Seems to me you are pushing things rather hard here, are you not?" he asked.

"What's that ter you, Phil Danfort?"

So retorted Blue-hand Bart.

"Oh, nothing in particular," was the easy reply, "but it looks to me as if you want to send these fellows off with a grand rush."

"Jest what we intend ter do," was the retort. "They is thieves, an' we has got 'em dead ter rights, an' we is goin' ter give 'em what they deserves. Now don't meddle with what ain't none of yer business."

"If it isn't my business, whose is it?" Danfort asked. "The young fellows and their old pard don't seem to have any friends among you, so I think I'll make it my business. Young man, what do you say to this charge?"

Billy rattled off a true and straight account of himself, Skinny and their old friend, so far as was needful, and wound up with the defiant assertion that he was innocent and would like to see any one try to hang him when he had his spurs on. If any one did, there would be music aboard, that was all.

Danfort admired him, from that minute.

"You have made a mistake this time, boys, that is plain," he protested. "The only thing for you to do is to drop it right here and now, and leave them alone. If you do not, somebody is going to get hurt, for you can see for yourselves that the lad means business."

"But what business has he got ter say he is innocent when we know he ain't?" the brainy Judge Lynch cried.

"There is this much about it," retorted the young man, his anger visibly rising. "Every man is innocent till you prove him guilty. Bring on your proof, and then we shall see about it."

The crowd had continued to increase, and rapidly within the last few minutes, till now Blue-hand and his gang were sadly in the smaller half.

Sentiment was largely in favor of the trio of strangers, and Blue-hand's little game was easily understood.

What he was after was revenge, and this was the way he hoped to get it, but his hope was vain.

"Waal, if we can't hang him, then," he bawled, "I want ter have my saterfaction out o' him fer this belt he gev me on ther snoot. He ain't goin' ter git off 'ithout that, you kin bet."

"What! Did he put that swelling on your nose?"

"That's what I did," cried Billy, "and I can finish the job for him, too, if he is so hungry for it. He has pushed things till he has got my Dutch up, and I'd as lieve take a whaling at his hands as not. I need taming, and need it bad, too, or I am going to harm myself—or somebody else."

All this was not bluster, but was said so meekly and in so droll a way that it raised a laugh.

Broadway Billy's appearance was deceptive.

His face was so boyish that the breadth of his shoulders and the span of his arm were points usually lost sight of.

"You don't mean you would fight him, do you?" Danfort asked, amazed.

"Why, yes, if he is aching so to get at me."

"Haw!" the bully brayed, one single, loud bray.

"Why, sonny, I'd take you over my knee so sudden that you would think you was in ther claws of yer schoolmarm ergain."

"And do you mean to say that you would fight with such a youth as this, Blue-hand Bart, you great big man-eater?" asked the young man, scathingly.

"Wouldn't fight him, naw!" sneered the Man-eater with a drawl. "But I would like ter spank him wunst, jest ter teach him manners. I'd 'a' done it last night, only that he got ther drop."

"And that's the same reason why you didn't hang me now, eh?" laughed Billy.

Danfort had turned his eyes upon Billy again, and was inspecting him with an eye to what chance he had with the giant.

"I'd like to see it, if I thought the lad had any chance against you," he declared.

"No, no," opposed the old ranger, "it won't do! You would git hurt, boyee, and I won't stand by an' see it."

"I don't know about that," spoke up, Skinny, bravely. "He has called us a set of thieves, Rover, and I'd like ter see Billy dab him jest one more fer it."

"And I'll do it!" Billy cried. "If I get the worst of it, that's my business and nobody's blame. But it is only on condition that I am assured fair play. That is all I ask."

"And that you shall have," promised Danfort.

With the promise, he drew a revolver and covered the ruffianly gang with it.

Billy had caught his eye, and had read therein that in him he had a backer who would stand by him, so he lowered his own weapons and handed them to Skinny.

"Give up your weapons," he cried, "and then come for me, you great, big, raw-boned, hairy elephant, you! Come for me, and if you can add injury to insult, I'll take it and never squeal."

Now Billy knew one thing, or believed he did, and that—that he must not allow the giant to close with him.

He did not have enough confidence in his strength to think he was equal to that, and wisely, too. But he did believe that he could whip the man in a fair stand-up fight, and he meant to do it if he could.

He remembered many and many a fight in which he had come out best man, and but few in which he had been conquered. That he knew how to use nature's weapons need not be urged. The chances were that the man, with years and hardened muscle in his favor, would whip him, but if he did it would not be without a brisk effort.

Now the crowd was all alive with suppressed excitement, and the great event of the season, this fight between man and boy, was not to be missed. Shouting spread the news rapidly, and the few denizens who had not already added their presence to the crowd were soon drawn there, until nearly every man in the camp was on hand. And by that time the two antagonists were ready to begin business.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL ABOUT THE BIG FIGHT.

"SWEET pertaters!" Billy ejaculated, in low tone, as he was saying a last word to Skinny, "I'm afraid I am in for it, little pard, and that's the fact."

"And it would serve you right, to get a good drubbing," Skinny declared. "It might teach you to keep your lip more to yourself hereafter. Not that I want to see it, for I want you to close that rummy wretch's eyes for him before he knows what is the matter with Hammah."

"Come younker, come to yer pop an' take yer spankin'," now sung out the big bully.

"All right, dad! Here I am," Billy cheerfully responded, and he turned and faced his man.

"Hold on just a minute now," spoke up Danfort. "I feel responsible for this thing, in a way, and I want to have a word to say about it."

"Waal, say yer say, an' be quick about it," the bully invited.

"It is simply this—"

He paused as if to frame some condition of the fight that he wanted to put in just the right shape.

"Waal, spit it out!" the Man-eater impatiently insisted. "I want ter spank ther kid while my hand is warm fer ther job. What is yer say?"

"It is this: You are big enough to whip half a dozen lads such as this one, and—"

"Bet yer life on't!"

"Save your wind and hear me out. You are the biggest of the two, and this quarrel seems to be yours. Now, if you whip the lad, that must settle the whole business for good and all. And on the other hand, if he whips you, that must satisfy you. Now, what do you say?"

The man laughed at the idea of his getting whipped.

"Why, I 'gree to it!" he cried. "If I spank ther baby, that's all I want ter do, an' I'll bother him nary more. And if he licks me—haw, haw, haw! If he licks me, then I'll pull in my horns and sneak off like ary cur, an' he kin be boss of ther camp. That's all."

"And in that case you won't trouble him any more."

"Nary a time more."

"Very good. Men, you have heard this, and it is for you to keep him to his word. My private opinion is that he is going to get whipped neatly."

The bully looked quickly at the speaker, as did nearly every one else.

"Yer don't mean no tricks?" he demanded.

"No tricks," he was assured, "unless your opponent has some that you are not acquainted with."

Billy had not failed to impress the young man by his coolness with something of the confidence he felt, and Danfort was in earnest in what he said.

"Waal, then, clear ther track!" the bully bellowed. "Heur comes yer pop, my pink-cheeked laddy, an' you is goin' ter git blistered whar ye set down, you kin bet on it. Come right heur, now, till I warm ye up."

"Right here I am," retorted Billy, facing him with his hands well up. "Wade right in, pop, and do yer fatherly duty. I'm sp'ilin' fer a dose o' shingle, I know, an' I think it would do me a heap of good. Put it on fer everlastin', when ye go at it."

"An' I am goin' at it now."

Billy's youthful, rosy face, and the other's as bearded and shaggy as a lion's, made it seem ridiculous.

But it was not quite so uneven a match as it looked to be. Billy had youth and more than its usual degree of activity, to offset the other's years and muscle.

With his words, the bully reached out, in an over-confident way, meaning to lay hold of Billy by the collar, jerk him around and almost dislocate his neck, and then apply the spanking he had threatened.

But he met with a sudden check.

Spat!

It was Billy's fist that met his nose for the second time, and this time the "claret" gushed forth in a stream, while the man staggered back completely dazed for the second.

The crowd broke into one wild cheer, and Blue-hand Bart fairly boiled over.

As soon as he could recover his balance, and anything like recover his dazed ideas, he rushed forward with a whoop, and ill it might have fared with Billy had he got hold of him, but—

Spat! Spat!

It was one plump fist after the other, in quick succession, and right in the eye, each one.

To the lookers-on it seemed no more than play for Billy to brush away the big, brawny arms, and plant his blows where he would.

And it was little more, in truth.

The rush was so wild and ignorant, that it was the fairest kind of an opening for the lad.

Billy was a boxer, as we know, and it did his heart good to get in such complete work as this at the very outset.

The battle was now his, and he was happy accordingly. His spirits fairly bubbled over, and he could not resist some taunting cries.

"Sweet pertaters!" he called out. "What's ther matter, pop? What makes ye act so funny about it? Why don't ye take me over yer knee as ye promised ter do? You know I need some stirrup oil, and so do I know it, so why don't you put it on? Come, try it again, an' mebbey you'll have better luck next time. Ha, ha, ha!"

And the crowd laughed with him.

"Sock it to him!" cried Skinny, clapping his hands, and acting like a crazy skeleton, though it was not to be denied that he now had more flesh than he had ever had before.

"Yas! Yas! Give him all he wants of it, my son," encouraged the old ranger. "By dad, but I never thought it was in ye! You are ther dandy boy of ther hull school, and that's what I'm ready ter stand up an' fight fer! Go fer him, an' give him all he are eechin' fer. Haw, haw, haw!"

And the crowd whooped and whistled and chirped, clapping hands and cat-calling and making all manner of noise and sport.

The bully?

Oh, yes, he was there. He was groping about, half-blinded and worse confused, bellowing and bawling like a wounded rhinoceros, wildly averring what he would do to pay up for all this.

"Here I am, dad, right this way," called Billy. "Be careful how you come, though, or you will bump your head again. You must have 'em in yer boots, haven't you? Here is the office, right here, and the captain is in. Step right up and knock at the door, and you will get a warm reception."

"I'll resepsheun yer!" was the bellow. "I'll rip yer backbone out of yer kerkiss an' change it inter a snake! I'll cut yer heart out an' tie it around yer neck! I'll dangle yer liver on my lodge-pole! I'll—"

"Hold on, hold on!" Billy cried. "I object to any such doin's as that. In the name of humanity I must refuse ter lend my body fer any such diabolical dissection as that, old hoss. You

can't do it; you can't practice any such surgical monstrosities on me, and I'll make it my business to see that you don't!"

Blue-hand was at him again by this time, and Billy found he had harder work to do. Now the man was a Man-eater indeed. His nature was that of an enraged beast, and any of the things he had threatened would not have been too bad for him to carry out, had he but the chance.

Danfort was hanging near, on the lookout for any danger to Billy's life, did the man get the better of him.

Blow after blow the giant rained at Billy, as hard and fast as he could, but not one could he make to take effect in the place he aimed at. Billy was never in the same spot for more than half a second at a time.

Knocking the blows aside in a way that proved his skill as a master of fistic art, he pranced around the angered man in the most taunting way imaginable, and his talk never ceased for a moment, while his droll sayings kept the crowd in a constant uproar.

Wind Canyon Camp had never had anything like this to happen within its limits. It was a waking-up such as it had never experienced. And the power of the cheering went to prove that few there were troubled with lack of lung force.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy cried, "but this is old times come again once more, sure pop. It reminds me of the way I used to polish off some of the Broadway kids; hey, Skinny? Only there was more fight in some of those little boys, and it was more interestin'. Why, pop, you ain't gettin' tired? This is no fun at all for the crowd, and I'm afraid they'll want their money back. Come, now, live up a bit, and see if you can't do something for the rising generation. It will never do ter give it up so Mister Brown!"

"Cuss yer, stop yer talkin' an' stay fer a second whar I kin reach ye!" the man cried, in his baffled rage, and he was fairly frothing at the mouth. "Once let me lay hands on ye, an' by ther sun, moon and stars if I don't pull ye limb from limb ye kin do ther same ter me!"

"But it's my business ter see that yer don't git ther chance," cried Billy. "The bargain was that you were only to spank me, but if you are goin' to put on all the extra trimmin's you have promised, I must refuse to comply with your polite request. I think it's about time I gave you a winder-up, don't you?"

"Yas, paste him!" was the cry. "If yer hit me ergain, by dogs I'll kill yer!" Mr. Blue-hand screamed. "I won't stand it!"

"Well, go and lie down to it then," cried Billy.

With his words, there being at that instant a splendid opening for a blow, he sent in a lifter, taking the man on the chest and almost carrying him off his feet, and down he went, all in a heap.

And at that the crowd just let itself out and whooped its wildest.

It looked as though this was the end, but it was not quite, for the man had one more effort to make.

He floundered around in the dust for a few seconds, screaming, swearing and crying—fact! and presently got himself together so that he could get up. And then, with a horrible threat, he jerked a concealed knife from the leg of his boot and made a murderous rush upon his nimble antagonist.

But Billy had by this time too many friends in the crowd for anything of this sort to succeed, and in a moment a dozen hands were laid upon the man and he was dragged away, while the crowd pressed around Billy, everybody eager to grasp his hand—that is, everybody save the followers of the vanquished bully, who, with dark scowls on their faces, went off to doctor up their disabled hero.

CHAPTER X.

MISSING: TILLY, THE BARBER.

AS soon as the enthusiastic crowd would permit, Billy allowed himself to be led away by the young man, Phil Danfort.

Skinny and the old ranger followed, and all were conducted to the office of a mine—the Gold Drift Mine, of which Danfort was superintendent. And once there, Billy was glad to take a chair and rest.

"Sweet pertaters! but that was something of a scrimmage, wasn't it?" he exclaimed.

"It was the best thing I have seen for many a day," declared Danfort. "It did my heart good to see you do that fellow up so. But, you will have to look out for him now, for he will get even with you if he can; he's a great ruffian!"

"That wasn't 'cordin' ter 'greement," reminded the ranger.

"He won't care anything for that. If he can

give you a stab in the back, my lad, he'll do it," was Danfort's idea.

"Then it's the business of this camp to see that he don't get no chance ter do anything of that sort, while we are here," put in Skinny. "You mustn't allow Billy to git hurt."

"And it's my business to see that he gets no chance to get the drop on me," supplemented Billy. "And I've got more business here, too, and maybe he will come in for a share of that. I hope he will, anyhow, for he looks like a third-rate villain, and it would do me good to put a ring in his nose."

"What is your other business here?" inquired Danfort, carelessly.

"I don't know what it is, yet, but thar's a p'izen diffikilty of some sort a-brewin', and I know it, and you can bet your hat that Broadway Billy don't set around with his legs crossed when there's a diffikilty to be straightened up. Say, do you know a feller called Death-face?"

"Yes; he was in the crowd with Blue-hand Bart," Danfort answered.

"What sort of customer is he?"

"About the same as Blue-hand. Birds of a feather flock together, you know."

"Yes; and there's a p'izen flock of 'em in this camp, too. I'm going to wake up the echoes here, before I make my exit, if I don't muchly mistake; and I don't think I do."

"You seem to have got hold of something. What is it?"

"I told you I don't know," reminded Billy. "But I do know that there is a skeem of some sort of deviltry going on. Another question—Who lives in that shanty next to Queen Anne Saloon, other side?"

"Why, that is where Blue-hand hangs up his hat."

"Sweet pertaters! You don't say so! Then I have got a poker in the fire for him, sure as sin."

Forgetting his tired feeling in an instant, Billy sprang up and executed what he called a "pigeon wing" in the middle of the office floor, with all his boyish vim.

"Say, what are you driving at, anyhow?" asked Danfort.

"Give it up," was Billy's reply, "but you can rely on it that I mean business right from the corner. Don't know what it is yet, but it's Broadway Billy's business to find out, and then there will be a circus, I'm thinkin'."

"You talk in riddles, my young friend, that is certain."

"He never talks anything else," asserted Skinny.

"Skinny," Billy turned upon him reprovingly, "don't be disrespectful. And don't you talk much any way. You'll create more appetite, if you do, and that will mean increased rates at the hotel."

"You won't have to pay it, anyhow," Skinny declared.

"By the way, Mr. Danfort, haven't got a scales here, have you? I want to weigh this stack of bones—Hal! so you have. Right this way, Skinny, and we'll see how you tip the beam."

There was a platform scales in one corner of the office, and catching hold of the lean lieutenant Billy dragged him to it.

Skinny got on, and Billy proceeded to weigh him, playfully beginning at five pounds, and working up a pound at a time as though he expected the next would surely hit the figure.

"Great ginger!" Skinny cried, when he had reached sixteen pounds, and was moving to the seventeen notch, don't you think I weigh any more than that?" and with a knock he sent the balance to the end of the beam.

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy cried, when the beam did not tip at that. "Is it you, Skinny?"

There was more of this pleasant jesting, and finally Skinny's correct weight was told. He weighed eleven pounds more than he had ever weighed in his life!

"Skinny, I congratulate you!" cried Billy, grasping his hand. "Lay on a few pounds more, and you will save me heaps of worry and expense. You see," turning to the others to explain, "he has always been so thin that his bones wore holes in his blanket faster than I could keep 'em darned."

Skinny stepped off the scales with a feeling of pride he could not conceal.

It was an immense satisfaction to him to find that he was gaining in weight, and he hoped to be able to come up to Billy's own avoirdupois.

Even while thus jesting and playing, Billy was not idle in deeper thinking.

He was considering whether or not to make a confidant of Danfort regarding the event of the night.

He had made one point of progress in the case, if it was a case—and it was his business to find out about that, and that was, that his enemy, Blue-hand, was concerned in it.

Having about made up his mind to tell the young mine superintendent about it, he was on the point of doing so when another young man burst suddenly into the office.

He was about the age of Danfort, and his face had an excited expression. He had been on the point of exclaiming as he dashed in, but seeing others there beside Danfort, checked himself.

"What is it, Champion?" Danfort asked quickly.

"Have you heard?" was the question.

"Heard what?"

"About Tilly the Barber."

Danfort showed keen interest in an instant, as Billy was quick to see.

"No; what about her?" he cried.

"She's missing. Men are beginning to look all over for her."

"The deuce you say! That is strange. Hasn't she been seen this morning?"

Danfort had clapped on his hat, and was moving toward the door. Whoever this "Tilly the Barber" was, he had interest in her.

"Nobody has seen her," he was told.

"That beats the deuce. Where is Bob Parson? Is he around?"

"Yes; and he is in a stew about it. He is—"

Another personage entered the office in haste, and without paying any attention to anything, faced Danfort, demanding:

"Phil Danfort, where is that girl?"

Broadway Billy was alive with interest now.

In an unexpected way things seemed to be working around to throw some light upon the mystery of the night.

He noted that Danfort had turned slightly pale, that he looked excited, and was glad the interruption had come in time to prevent his telling him what he knew. It was possible that he had had a hand in the business.

"Don't you know where she is?" was the counter-demand.

"Thunder, no!" the retort.

"And what brought you to me, thinking I do?"

"You know well enough why, Phil Danfort. Because you have been heard to say that no man should marry her but you."

At this Danfort smiled.

"It is about an even thing between us, then," he declared. "You have said about the same thing. In fact, you have warned me to keep off, as you considered you had the best claim there."

Billy was getting light.

"Rivals in love, hey?" he interrogated in mind. "There's something behind all this, and I'm betting my socks on it. Willyum, it is your business ter find out what it is."

"Then you swear you don't know anything about where she is?" insisted the excited newcomer.

"Yes, I swear that I don't know anything about her, Bob Parson," was the firm reply.

"If she is gone, missing, let us make it our business to find her. We are rivals, but in such a matter as this it is to our interest to work together. After we have found the prize, then we will resume our fighting."

This was with a poor attempt at humor.

"Just what I was going to propose," declared Parson. "The idea hit me that you had stole a march on me and run the girl off, but since you swear that you have not, of course that settles it. Come, let's hustle and see what is to be done. We must hustle."

And with that, the man turned and was gone.

"Who is this Bob Parson?" asked Billy, as soon as he was out of the room.

"A sort of card sport who has been hanging up here for some months," was the reply.

"And who is this Tilly, who seems to have turned up missing this morning? It is information I am after, you see."

"Why, she is a neat and pretty young woman who came here some weeks ago and opened a barber-shop. Her name is Tilly Wood, but we all call her Tilly the Barber."

"I begin ter see, said the blind man, but he lied. Now if you didn't run her off, as Parson puts it, and if he didn't do it himself then the question is, who did?"

Yes, that's the question."

"Any other lover in the field?"

"No one for whom she has shown any friendliness."

"Then there must be a dark horse in the race. Couldn't be the work of this Death-face, or Blue-hand, or any of their gang, think you?"

"They're none too good for it, but what would be their object?"

"Give it up. That is for you to say. I'm a pilgrim and a stranger here, you know."

"But this isn't finding her, or any clew to her whereabouts," exclaimed Danfort. "You'll have to excuse me; I'm off to see what is to be learned about this thing. Will see you again."

And leaving them in possession of the office, he dashed out and hurried off in the direction of the camp center.

"Here's a pretty mess," sung Billy, as soon as he was gone. "This is the second chapter in the mystery of last night, pards. What do you think of it? Seems to me that we must take a hand in this game of hide-and-go-seek, and see if we can't find the button. And by button I mean the aforementioned Tilly the Barber."

CHAPTER XI.

BILLY FILES A CLAIM.

BILLY was for going out immediately to gather up points, but his old ranger friend detained him.

"My son," he said, "lend year ter jest a word that I have ter whisper to ye. I have got a older head on my shoulders than you have on yours."

Billy immediately took off his hat, clapped it under his arm, and stood by in respectful attention, waiting to hear whatever was coming, and he expected nothing short of another well-meant lecture.

He was not mistaken.

"My son," said the old man, "your life is in danger here, and I have been a-thinkin' that ther best thing we kin do is to pack up and be on our way while we are all safe. There would be nothin' cowardly about that, ye know."

"Mebby not," spoke Billy.

"Sartainly not," urged the ranger. "You have made enemies of the very wu'st men in the camp, and they would not hesertate a tall ter drop ye with a bullet on ther sly, if chance offered, day or night. You can't deny that it ain't safe fer you ter be seen around, after ther way you polished off that hairy monster."

"That's logic," Billy quietly assented.

"But you don't mean ter heed it, I kin see it in yer eyes," the old man cried in impatience.

"You are rash, my son, rash—rash!"

"It's a weakness I've got," sighed Billy.

"I'm not responsible fer it. I was born so. And you have hit it right when you say that I don't mean to scare off; I am not built that way."

"Then you mean ter stay heur and take ther risk?"

"You hit it right again," the lad declared. "Sweet pertaters! you don't begin to know me, Rover; does he Skinny! Why, when the fever gets hold of me it hangs on like death to a nigger, as the sayin' has it. You couldn't drive me away from here with a club, and that's the fact. But at the same time there is no denyin' the fact that I had better be carryin' an umbrella as some sort of protection against stray bullets."

Skinny was grinning from ear to ear, but the old ranger was too much concerned to permit a smile to appear on his face.

"There is no joke about this," he declared. "You had better take it in a serious way, my son. These men are none too good to murder ye in cold blood—the way that coward went fer ye with his knife proved that—and if you take my advice you will keep mighty shady."

"Tell you what I'll do," proposed Billy, soberly. "Skinny here has often told me that I am all mouth. I'll open it wide when we go out, and then nobody will see me—unless Skinny has fictionized about it. But, honest Injun now, Rover, there is no use your sayin' a word about my goin' away, for it won't do a bit of good. Here I am going to stay till my business is done; so the next best thing is for you and Skin to act as my body-guard."

The old ranger sighed.

"Waal, I s'pose we'll have ter do this," he said. "But you mustn't try ter deny that old Roger warned ye."

"Wouldn't think of it, Rover. And now let's go fer p'int's—ter say nothin' about quarts and pecks. Here is a mystery, and one that has got ter be sifted. Come along, pards."

Clapping on his hat, he stepped to the door and out.

The moment he did so he stopped short with an exclamation.

Just passing the office, and heading for the center of the camp, was a man with a drove of ten or twelve horses.

There would have been nothing so very sur-

prising in that alone, but Billy's quick eye noted the fact that the horse the man was riding was his—Billy's own—missing animal.

Billy drew back before being discovered, and stopped the others.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, pointing.

"Your hosses, by ther battle o' Gittysburg!" the old ranger exclaimed.

"Great ginger! so they are!" echoed Skinny.

"You can bet your merry whiskers, Rover, that Broadway Billy has got business here now!" Billy cried. "You couldn't draw me away with a team o' mules. We're going to have our own, Skinny, or we are going to rupture a buckle trying to get it. We don't leave here without our horses, and that settles it, flat."

There was the ring of business in his vow.

The man who had the animals was a rough, hard-looking fellow, clad as a cowboy. He was perhaps forty years of age, and wore a fierce, bristly mustache of wonderful size, while the rest of his face was covered with a month's growth of stubble.

He rode on toward the hotel, his other horses in tow, and with his broad hat stuck up in front in a defiant air.

There was no denying the thought that struck Billy—that he was a bad man—and one in whom the lads might find a tough enemy to deal with.

It was safe to conclude that he would not give the horses up unless forced to do so, and it looked like a big undertaking to try to make him do it. But Billy did not allow these thoughts to discourage him.

"He's a bad one, Skinny," he remarked, "but right is right, every time."

"You're right, he's bad," echoed Skinny. "It strikes me we are going to have a serious job getting our horses away from him."

"And, too," said the ranger, "if he is one of the fellers that stole 'em, he will reckonize us, no doubt. S'pose we foller him up an' see what ther effect will be on him."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Billy. "We had better file our claim while the discovery is fresh, anyhow. I'll do the chin-wagging act, if you will stand ready to back me up."

They emerged from the office and crossed the flat in the direction of the hotel, only a little distance behind the drover.

"Whoa!" the latter sung out, when he drew rein.

"Hello!" from one of the idlers around. "It's Texas Sid got back ergain?"

"Yas, back ergain," the horseman answered, taking off his hat and wiping his forehead with his hand.

"And with a purty pert lot o' hosses, too," remarked another in the group.

"As good a lot as I ever fetched in, boyees," the drover declared, "and if any of you wants a good animile, now is yer chance ter buy."

Billy and his pards had now come up, and they passed around to the front, and as they did so Billy was keeping an eye upon the horseman to see what the effect would be when he saw them.

As he finished speaking, the man glanced at them.

Instantly he gave a slight start.

But he was equal to the occasion, and immediately said:

"Now is your chance, young feller, if you want a boss. Take your pick and pay the price."

"I'm not buying my own property at present," responded Billy, coolly, as he took a critical survey of the horse the man was mounted upon.

"Not buyin' yer own property!" the fellow fiercely cried. "What do ye mean by that?"

The demand was not without a startling oath.

But the effect upon cool Billy was not noticeable. It did not seem to scare him any, to speak of.

"I mean just what I say," was his easy response. "I don't know who sold you that horse you are on, sir, but I do know that the animal is my property."

"And I kin swear to what ther lad says," supplemented the old ranger.

"And I lay claim to this one," Skinny bravely asserted, indicating his own.

"Waal, may I be chawed!" the drover cried. "I reckons you is barkin' round ther wrong stump this heur time, gents. I never buy hoss-flesh that I don't git straight as a bee-line, an' that's ther way I got these."

"I can't help where you got them, or how," declared Billy, "we know our own horses, and we want them."

"Then you'll have ter pay ther price, that's all."

"Are you willing to accept the proof, if we can give it?"

"Why, you darn young whelp!" with a fierce frown, "do yer mean ter insist thet I don't know what I'm talkin' erbout? Mebby you mean ter insinuate thet I stole yer hosses."

"No; we are not going back of the bare fact," returned Billy. "These two animals are ours, and we mean to have them. All that is necessary is for us to give the satisfactory proof, and you will have to pass them over."

"Haw-haw! I see meself doin' that now."

"You will have to see yourself doing it pretty soon, if you pretend to be a fair and square sort of man."

"And I don't reckon as you'll find anybody heur as will say I ain't," the man made his boast.

This was drawing a crowd around them already.

"When we came to this camp yesterday," said Billy, in clear tones, "we carried two saddles and bridles with us. This everybody knows. We told that we had been robbed of our horses. Now those saddles bear the same brand that these horses bear, and if that isn't proof enough, then I'd like to know what proof you would demand."

It seemed clear enough, certainly, but it was not likely that it would be accepted.

"An' what is that ar' brand?" the man asked. "What are it like?"

Billy told him exactly, and the crowd for the most part seemed satisfied. It looked like a clear case.

"Waal, so fur so good," drawled the man. "Now mebby you has a bill of sale about yer clothes that will give some weight to yer yarn. If yer has that, then of course thar'll be some use ter investergate ther case."

"Unfortunately, we haven't," admitted Billy. "The horses were given to us, as we have already told here, and there was no thought of any such trouble as this coming out of it."

"Waal, now," with a longer drawl, and in a tone of hidden defiance. "I am sorry fer ye, young fellers, real sorry, but I can't help ye any. I got ther critters in honest trade, and can't give 'em up on your say-so. I have no more proof that these heur hosses was yourn, than I have that you didn't steal ther saddles. See?"

"Yes, we see," retorted Billy. "Now, one and all, you are warned against buying these horses of this man. I mean the two we have indicated. They are stolen property, and we intend to prove it to you before they leave this camp. This is business, right from the corner of Business street, and don't you forget it."

Having no further argument to offer, he turned away, leaving the man to gaze after him a moment in silence.

"A game chicken, by darn!" he exclaimed. "But his claim ain't no good heur. Reckon we'll hear more from him later. Waal, let him fetch on his proof, if he's got any, that's all."

CHAPTER XII.

BROADWAY BILLY BAFFLED.

FURTHER down the street was another crowd, around the shanty in front of which was a barber's pole.

Billy led the way in this direction.

He knew, of course, what was the excitement there, and wanted to learn what progress was being made in the search for the missing girl barber.

"We have filed our claim, anyhow," he observed, as they went along, "and it won't be easy for him to sell the horses to any honest man, that is sure. And now to see what is going on here."

"We know purty sartain that the scream what you heerd last night was let out by this missin' gal," remarked the old ranger. "Ther thing ter do is ter find whar she is 'prisoned, and git her out."

"And ter do that," said Billy, "we have got ter have our eyes on that fellow Death-face and his gang. I think Blue-hand will feel like keepin' out of the race for one day at least, to mend up. Sweet pertaters! but it makes me laugh inside whenever I think of the good luck I had in pasting him."

"You won't laugh, if he gets one of his galoots ter fire some lead inter you," declared Skinny.

"Wet blanket again, bey, Skinny? I thought you would drop that croakin' as you laid meat on yer bones, but you don't seem to. Well, I'd rather have you go home without me than to go home myself without you, so let 'er flicker."

"You need a wet blanket once in a while," averred Skinny. "You git too warm altogether."

for safety, and there's danger that you'll explode, as gas is likely to do—"

"There, now, Skin, don't forget that you have just got up out of a sick bed, and that a relapse might settle you."

"No relapse thar," cried the old ranger, slapping the lean lieutenant on the back.

At the shanty all was excitement.

It had not been a great while since the discovery had been made that the girl barber was missing, and the camp was getting warmed up to a search for her.

The discovery had been made by Bob Parson, as the boys and their old friend speedily learned, listening to the crowd, where it was being talked over freely; and he had lost no time in giving the alarm.

At an early hour, about as early as the shop was usually open, he had stepped over from the Queen Anne Saloon, where he made his headquarters, to get his regular Wednesday morning shave, but had found the shanty closed. Without knocking, he had gone away, to come back later.

It was about an hour later when he returned, and the shop was still closed. In the mean time others had been there, and some were standing around wondering why Tilly didn't open for business. As it was known that she worked pretty late into the evening, however, they decided, after talking it over, to let her sleep and take her comfort and so preserve her roses; for she was said to be a pretty girl.

When, however, at the end of another hour Parson had come back once more, and the shop was yet closed, he was alarmed, and spoke to some of the men about making an investigation.

He and others had now knocked at the door several times, but had got no reply from within, and it began to look serious.

They speedily came to the conclusion that something ought to be done, and so after knocking several times more, at both the front and rear doors, they proceeded to break their way in.

Everything seemed to be in order in the rear room, which served as kitchen and sitting-room in one, small as it was.

In front was the shop, and that, too, was in its usual state.

There was only one room more—the bed-room—that was a little room off from the kitchen, just large enough for the smallest kind of a bed, and after some hesitation one of the men had peered in there.

The bed was vacant, but had been slept in. At any rate, it was mussed as if it had. But the girl was not there.

Further examination showed that she had taken her hat and shawl; but the question was, How had she gone out and left the doors fastened within?

This was what gave mystery to it all, to say nothing about why she had gone, and where.

All these points, and more, were freely discussed by the crowd, and Billy and his companions gathered them in as fast as they were dropped.

"And so I say it's a mystery," finally declared Bob Parson.

"It looks like it, that's certain," asserted Billy, letting his voice be heard for the first time. "Will you allow a child of my tender years to offer a suggestion?"

This, after the way he had "done up" the bully of the camp, raised a laugh.

"We shall be only too glad to hear a suggestion from anybody," responded Parson.

"You seem to have overlooked the fact that there are windows to the shanty. How are they fastened? See if one of them is open."

It seemed strange that no one had thought of this, for Parson had mentioned nearly everything else, and what he had missed was supplied by Danfort, since his coming.

One of the windows was found to be unfastened, while the other was secured with a nail.

"It would seem to indicate that she went out at a window," suggested Parson.

"Nonsense!" cried Billy.

"Well, then, smart Aleck, what does it indicate?" Parson snapped.

"It goes to prove that she was taken off by force," Billy boldly asserted.

And as he made the assertion he looked at Parson and Danfort, to note how it struck them.

Both looked serious enough over it, and Danfort seemed to grow a shade pale, as Billy thought he could detect.

"How does it prove that?" Danfort asked.

"Because it proves that after she went out the door some one else came in, secured the door and then got out at a window."

The rivals looked at one another.

"There may be something in this," spoke Parson.

"Likely there is," Danfort admitted. "It seems to be about the only way to account for the doors being found bolted on the inside."

"You have given us a hint, young fellow," Parson then said to Billy, "and I beg your pardon for snapping you up so. Maybe you can go a step further and suggest something more."

"Well, it looks to me as though the young woman had been carried off by some one," Billy rejoined. "And from the fact that nothing was heard during the night, it seems to me there must have been three or four men concerned in it, or at any rate enough to overpower her so that she couldn't give any outcry."

Billy was going more by what he knew than by what he could guess of the matter.

"But suppose she went off of her own accord, as maybe she did, seeing that she had on her hat and shawl," suggested Danfort.

Billy eyed him sharply.

"In that case," he responded, "she must have gone out by the window; and if you can explain why she would do that, you will do well."

"I can't."

"Nor can any one," agreed Parson.

And what was to be done about it, was a question that had been asked over and over again.

"Has any one else about the camp been noticed as missing this morning?" asked the young New York shadower.

No one could name any one who was conspicuous for his absence.

"Or any one could have any object in spiriting the girl away, can you suggest?" Billy further asked.

The rivals looked at each other in an accusing way.

"No, no one," Parson declared.

Danfort did not speak.

"Then I would suggest that, before you widen the circuit any," Billy proposed, "that every shanty in this camp be searched. I mean every building, and every other place where she might be in hiding or be imprisoned."

"That looks like foolishness," declared Danfort.

Billy might have agreed with him, did he not know what he did.

"She might be imprisoned in one of them," he insisted. "You can't be sure of it unless you search, and there's no use looking out of the camp till you are sure she isn't in it."

"That's all so," agreed Danfort, "but it in a way accuses every man in the camp of being the guilty one."

"Every man is innocent till he is proved guilty," Billy answered, giving back the same words Danfort had uttered not long before.

"I am rather in favor of that idea," said Parson. "Innocent men will be only too glad to let their palaces be searched, and consider it no insult either."

"Right you be!" was the cry from more than one.

"Well, let it be done, then," agreed Danfort. "Let's be doing something toward finding her."

This was just what Broadway Billy wanted to see done.

It had been his suspicion that the girl was imprisoned in some shanty near the hotel, for the reasons that have been shown.

The proposition agreed upon, everybody seemed willing enough to have it carried out, and it only remained to proceed.

"Since this is to be done," spoke Parson, "let us do it thoroughly. Let's go out here to the west side of the camp, in a body, and work right through to the east side, taking in every hole and corner in our way. And a hundred dollars reward to the man who finds her!"

"And another hundred from me," added Danfort, not to be outdone.

The search was begun, and Billy noted one thing. That was, that the rivals did not separate for a moment.

"They suspect each other," he decided, "and they don't mean to have any funny tricks played. But there's no chance for any, with all this crowd in the hunt. If that young razor-flipper is here, she is going to be found, that's all."

But she was not found, consequently was not there.

The search ended, and Broadway Billy was disappointed and baffled. Knowing what he did of the affair, it puzzled him the more.

After the search nobody knew what to do. It seemed that nothing could be done till further developments were forthcoming. It was a case

that baffled them all. But Broadway Billy and his partners held the clew, and it was their business to set to work.

CHAPTER XIII.

INVITED TO IMBIBE.

THE remainder of the day passed without much excitement.

Billy and the old ranger took it upon themselves to keep their eyes upon Blue-hand Bart and Death-face Darby as much as possible.

Skinny was not allowed to exert himself too much, and was left to hang around the hotel to get all the rest he could. And he did not seem to care to wander far away from his base of supplies, for he made a raid upon the kitchen about every second hour.

In his secret mind he was beginning to get alarmed about himself, considering the enormity of his appetite and the rapidity with which his food digested and his stomach craved more, but the old ranger had told him not to worry. As long as the mill was able to grind, he had said, there was no danger. And besides, that was the way it was with them all, meaning those to whom he had ever administered that mysterious weed for the cure of fever.

So Skinny ate, slept, and was happy—that was, reasonably happy. His concern for Billy was a constant damper upon his spirits.

Texas Sid, the drover who had their horses in keeping, had put away his stock and was lounging around the hotel and the Queen Anne, talking "horse" most of the time, and loudly denouncing Billy's claim as a rank false one the balance.

Billy had noted that he was not unacquainted with Blue-hand Bart, Death-face Darby, and others of that select set.

The old ranger had spoken his own thought that perhaps they were all concerned in the theft of the animals, or at any rate, were in league with the rascals who had done the work.

And if their horses were among the stolen, were not all the rest of the herd stolen?

It was reasonable to believe so.

The trio had not been in the Queen Anne yet, except merely to look in during the afternoon, when the place was about vacant and the proprietor was dozing.

It was one of the lively spots of the wild camp of an evening.

That evening, when it was going at its usual blast, with its gambling, dancing, etc., they ventured in.

Skinny had insisted upon going with them, declaring that he was feeling as well as he ever had felt in his life, and certainly he looked it.

The old ranger had been opposed to any such proceedings on the part of Billy, and had warned him of the danger he was running in venturing there, but Billy heeded him not.

"Sweet pertaters!" had been his exclamation.

"If you want ter grip a p'izen dilemma by the horns, Rover, ye have got ter grip right on, even if there is danger. We want to get at the bottom of all this consarned diffikilty, and so we must not keep out of the swim. Never get a clew up there in our pigeon-hole of a room, that's sure."

Nothing would turn him, so they went, as said.

When they entered there was a great "stag dance" going on, to the tune of a cracked old fiddle in the hands of a one-eyed miner.

Women were scarce at this camp, so men had to have men for partners at these inopportune balls, and they were "hoeing it down" in good style.

There was Blue-hand Bart, more than half full of the dreadful poison that was sold at the camp, with Texas Sid for his partner, and they were making the windows jingle as they staggered and stamped around, each keeping the other from falling, and apparently more by good luck than by good management.

They seemed not to notice the lads and their old friend, and the trio took seats not far from the door, Billy exercising enough prudence not to venture his head too far into the lion's mouth.

Presently Billy remarked to Skinny:

"They are not half as full as they pretend to be, thin one."

"Jest what I was goin' ter observe meself," put in the old ranger, who caught the remark. "You want ter look out fer 'em, lad."

"I shall try to do that," assured Billy. "You just see that nobody takes me foul from behind, and I will take care of the front part all right, if nothing gives way."

Presently the fiddle ceased its squeaking, and the dancers stopped their giddy whirl.

Either by accident or design, then, Blue-hand and his tigerish-looking partner reeled off in the

direction of the table where our friends were sitting, bringing up against it with a crash.

The trio had sprung up in time to escape damage, though Skinny received quite a push.

It was this that fired Billy up in an instant, and he cried:

"You had better look where you are going! Your eyesight don't seem to be good, since your eyes went into mourning, you big duffer you!"

The drunken dancers reeled back a step, and Blue-hand shouted:

"Hello! This heur are ther cuss what added ter my beauty, Texas Sid. This heur are ther very identic, as I live!"

"Yer don't say!" the other cried. "Got yer foul, did he? Pasted ye when ye wasn't ready, and all that. Reckon it's about time fer ye ter take him down a peg, don't ye think it are?"

"I should say so; but ther fack is, I'm out o' tune, an'—"

"Then I'll do it fer ye," the Texan offered, generously. "Not that I'll fight him; I don't fight boys; but I'll dose him in a way that he won't relish, and in a way what will be ther best sort o' fun fer ther crowd."

"Don't forget to count me into the programme," said Billy, carelessly.

"You bet not!" was the shout. "Black ther eyes of my pard, would yer, when he wasn't havin' no fair show at ye. I'll show ye a trick wuth two of that. And I've got it in fer ye on me own account, too. Call me a boss-thief, would ye? We'll take all that sort o' silliness out of yer head, me buck."

All this was said with an occasional hiccup, but much of the man's drunkenness was pretended, as Billy had discovered.

"When are you going to begin?"

Billy coolly asked, as if he had no concern in the evil designs, whatever was coming.

"Right off soon," was the retort.

Blue-hand had now stepped back a step, leaving Texas Sid to the fore.

Skinny and the old ranger stood with hands on weapons. They did not relish this, since it was Billy's fault that they had entered the den at all.

"All right, open the ball just as soon as you like," was the cool invitation. "I am only a child, but I guess I can hold up my end. What's the programme, anyhow?"

"You have got ter take a drink, that's what!"

This raised a snicker, as such a thing was not considered any very great punishment.

"I have, eh?" from Billy.

"Bet yer life on't!" was the swaggering boast. "And it won't be a plain, every-day sort of drink, either."

This gave the cue to what was intended.

"Before you give the order," said Billy to that, "let me chirp my little chirp. I have never taken a drink in my life, and I don't think I'll begin now. Nothing stronger than coffee ever goes down my throat."

"Then yer mean ter say yer won't drink?"

"That's the sum and substance of it," Billy affirmed.

"Haw, haw, haw!" the fierce-looking border brigand laughed. "Heur is goin' ter be fun, fellers! Heur is goin' ter be a sweet old time! Ther dear boy says he has never touched, tasted or handled ther vile stuff, or somethin' to ther same effect, so it will be his maiden effort. Haw, haw, haw! Saay, barkeeper, jest mix up a nice little rotten-egg cocktail, will you?"

"Cover 'em," whispered the old ranger, "an' we'll back our way out of heur."

"Nixey," Billy refused. "We have got the best hand in this game, for by looking around I can see that our friends outnumber our foes two to one. Let him go, and we'll show him a trick worth two of his."

This was hastily whispered, while the ruffian was giving his attention to the bar.

"Want it strong?" the man at the bar asked.

"The stronger the better—Haw, haw, haw!"

This sort of thing is a standing joke among the roughest of the rough in the wild West, and nothing of our own inventing.

The barkeeper set to work, having the required articles on hand, and soon the delightful aroma of a spoiled egg pervaded the place, causing many to hold their noses.

Into a glass it was put together with various other ingredients almost as appetizing, among which were mustard and kerosene, and pretty soon it was said to be ready.

"Now, sonny, step up and drink to ther healt' of Blue-hand Bart," the villain pleasantly invited.

He made a mock bow and waved his hand toward the bar.

"Kill ther cuss!" cried the old ranger, in hot rage. "If you don't, by dad, I shell have ter."

"Never mind that," whispered Billy, hastily. "You only back me up, that is all. Guard me behind." And then to the Texan:

"Y—you really don't mean to make me drink that, mister?"

"Haw, haw, haw! Yas, in course I do, you chicken. Amble right up thar, or I'll have ter make ye do it. You'll come no foolishness over me."

Billy made a slow motion as if to draw his weapons, but the Texan had him covered quickly. The Texan had sobered wonderfully by this time.

"None o' that," he cried. "Walk right up an' drink that 'ar stuff, or thar will be a vacant place at your famby spread at meal-times. Do yer hear what I'm sayin'?"

"Please don't," Billy whined. "Please don't make me drink that. I couldn't do it, really I couldn't. I couldn't never, never, never drink it. Ugh!"

Blue-hand Bart was delighted, almost beside himself with joy.

The drop turned in the advantage of Texas Sid made all the difference in the world with the lad, he saw. And so thought every one else.

There was a good deal of laughter going on at Billy's expense, but he had his eyes about him and knew what he was doing. He noticed that friends were working slowly in his direction.

"We'll take some of ther funny out of yer," the man cried. "You git right up thar, now, an' take that dose, or you'll need a pine box. It's one or t'other, an' that mighty quick, so make your choice."

Billy whined and protested, almost cried, as it seemed, and this was just the best kind of fun for his enemies. And as he did so he moved nearer and nearer to the bar, not actually refusing, as he had done at first, but with a feeble if-I-must-I-suppose-I-must, sir. But presently something happened, and the tables were turned.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD ROVER'S PLAN.

It all happened so quickly that no one could understand how it had been done, scarcely.

Billy had reached out his hand to take the nauseous dose, and had his fingers almost on the glass, when suddenly he sprang back, ducking his head as if to avoid some object that had been hurled at him from the rear.

It was a trick that was performed to perfection. No wonder it deceived the rascally Texas Sid. He dodged, too, the thought flashing upon him that something had been thrown at the glass, and as he dodged he half turned his head to see what was coming.

That was the fatal part of it for him.

Like a lightning flash, Billy had his weapons in hand, and their cold tubes were pointed straight at the fellow's head.

"Drop your weapons or die!" he cried.

It had all been done in a space of time that was of no more than one second's duration.

The man's jaw dropped, his face paled, and a sickly, shame-faced expression came upon his bewhiskered visage.

Billy had him now. He dared not move, for the lad's piercing eyes were fixed upon his own, and to move a muscle might mean death instantly.

"Drop your weapons," Billy repeated, with grim sternness, "or I'll lift the top of your head off as sure as you stand there. I mean business, right from the cor— That's it."

The man had let his revolvers drop.

A ringing cheer greeted this, coming from the majority of those present.

"That's ther style!" cried the old ranger, delighted. "Now make him take his own medicine, boyee, or kill him as he desaves."

And with his words the old man put himself at Billy's back, facing the rear, and with revolver in hand threatened to shoot the first man who dared to interfere. And Skinny was with him.

"That is just what I intend to do," Billy declared. "You have got to drink that dose, Mister Man, or down goes your shebang, and don't you forget. You thought you had a snap, but you'll find me a snapper. Now, then, drink it!"

"Not by er mighty sight—"

"Want to die, do you? Well, take your choice, for it's one or the other, and that in just one minute. You take that dose or I'll shoot!"

"You don't mean it—"

"Don't you fool yourself that way. Come, now, you're wasting time. If you don't hurry it will be everlastingly too late."

"But I couldn't drink that: nobody could."

"You meant to make me do it, though, and I'm going to make you do it, or kill you. Quick, now."

Billy would not have shot the fellow, of course, but the man could not know that.

"I—I beg off," the rascal gasped. "I beg yer pardon an' chaw dirt. I—"

"Make him take it," cried the old ranger.

"Yes!" "Yes!"

"He'll take it or take lead," Billy sternly decreed. "And there's only five seconds left, too. Come, Mister Mustache, take your elixer or take your exiter, just as you like."

With this final command he thrust his revolvers a little nearer, and his determined expression settled into a look of iron-like resolve, while his eyes, black and flashing, seemed to speak louder than his words.

The fellow hesitated.

The revolvers came yet nearer, and Billy looked "shoot."

And at the same time the old ranger, Skinny, and others, were crying out for him to shoot the coward.

With a groan the terrible tiger reached out and took the glass.

"Quick!" cried Billy. "Time's up!"

He seemed on the very point of pressing the triggers, and the cowed ruffian raised the awful dose to his lips.

But that was all. With a terrible retch the poor fellow resurrected his supper, dropping the glass to the floor, and then amidst the wild whoopings of the crowd he leaned against the bar and acted like a seasick landsman.

"Well, it's better to be sick than dead, anyhow," commented Billy, "and as you made a noble effort I'll let you off. Next time you want to be sure you have got the right pig by the ear before you begin to twist. When you pick up Broadway Billy for a flat you'll drop him for a sharp, every time."

"I'll—Uggghh! I'll drop ye fer a—Auggghh!—fer a corp—corpse afore ter-morrow's sun shines!"

So the fellow threatened, between the acts as it were.

"An' if he don't I will," put in Blue-hand Bart.

"I defy you both," retorted Billy. "I have proved you to be just what you are, a pair of blatant cowards. If you want any more of it, apply at my office. Come on, Rover and Skinny. It smells bad here."

They backed out of the den, weapons still to the front, and as soon as they were out, made haste in the direction of the hotel.

"My son, this heur camp ain't goin' ter hold ye now," declared the old ranger in earnest tones.

"I'm afraid it is getting hot," Billy admitted. "They will be after my gore now, sure. What is going to be done about it? We seem to have waked up the nest of tigers with a vengeance."

"You have, indeed. I would say, let's get our traps and move out of the camp this very hour. We can be miles away by daylight, and it's no coward act, either, but common sense prudence. What do ye say to it? Don't ye think it's proper, Skinny?"

"I think it's the best thing to do," Skinny admitted.

"It would no doubt be a healthy move, I can't deny that," Billy reflected, "but what about our horses? And what about the mystery of that missing girl? Sweet pertaters! it ain't ter be thought of, Rover. Nixey, McGinnis! Broadway Billy can't be choked off that way. Why, I could never go home and face Inspector Br—Hello! what have we here?"

Hasty steps were heard behind them, and Billy had turned with his weapons ready for business.

Two men were seen approaching.

"Hold on there," Billy called out. "What's wanted? We have got you under cover, so look out."

"Don't shoot!" was the hasty cry. "We're friends. Merely want to say a word to you. See, our hands are up."

They kept right on, and their arms were held up as they came.

In another moment they were at hand, and proved to be no other than Bob Parson and one Champion Dodger—proper name, a friend of Danfort's.

"Oh, it's you," Billy greeted. "What's the word?"

"It is this: You and your pards had better be getting out of this camp as soon as you can. Blue-hand, Texas Sid, and all their gang, have taken an oath that you shall die before morning. Wouldn't be surprised if they burned the hotel in order to get at you."

"It begins to get interesting, that's certain," Billy admitted. "But still I don't feel like turning tail to and sneaking off between suns. It's contrary to my bringing up. I'll have ter stay till the meetin' is over, I think, and take my chances. And then, too, it don't speak well for you solid men of the camp, if you are going to let such a gang as that do as they please."

"Well, we have warned you," said Parson, and can do no more. It's your own funeral. If you want to go I'll provide you with horses."

Billy eyed him keenly.

"That's generous," he commented, "uncommonly generous. But I think we'll have to decline with thanks. We'll stay, I think, and it is the business of the proprietor of the hotel to see that we are protected."

After a few words more the men turned back, and Billy and his friends went on to the hotel.

"You're a lad that beats my understandin'," commented the old ranger. "Yer see them fellers thinks jest as I do about it. You had no business, my son, ter go inter that saloon an' git inter this second batch o' trouble, and ther more so as thar was nothin' ter be gained by it. You is rash, my son, awful rash!"

"Sweet pertaters! Rash, am I? That's what the doctor said when I had the measles, and I guess he didn't cure me up right. I've had symptoms that way ever since. But you are wrong, old man, when you say there was nothin' ter be gained by our goin' ter that saloon. I believe I have got hold of the business end of the whole rotten skeem now, and it's my business ter sift it down and find out what's at the bottom."

"What do ye mean?"

"Didn't it strike you that Parson is overish anxious about getting us out of the camp?"

"He seems ter like ye, my son, and seems anxious ter see ye git out o' this hot hole, ter my way o' thinkin'."

"He likes me, oh yes, you bet he does; but he'd like me better if I was a good ways off. I tell you what it is, old man, that same Parson is the king-pin of the whole rotten circle, and don't you forget it. Didn't I see him there in the saloon talkin' to Death-face Darby, while Blue-hand and Texas Sid was keepin' the 'tention of the crowd! Mebbby not, but I rather think I did."

"You don't say!"

"Yes, I do say; and I say that I'm going to keep my eye on that pretty gent the rest of this night."

"Waal, by dad, my son, you are a screamer, and I'm saying so. But, here is a thought that comes inter my old noodle: If he is so 'tarnal anxious ter have you out of the way, and you is jest as 'tarnal anxious ter watch him, why not make believe go and let 'em think you have been scared off?"

Billy grasped his hand.

"Sweet pertaters!" he cried. "You have hit it right, uncle, sure pop. That shows the advantage brains gives a feller. If I had more of that and less of brass, I would be better off than I am. You have struck the key-note of the whole thing, and we'll act upon it. Come, let's hurry, fer we are scared most to death. We'll pay our bill, pack up our little traps, and git! Come, for I'm all a-tremble with fear. Don't you hear my teeth a-chatterin'?"

He hurried into the hotel, and there announced to the landlord their decision and paid their bill.

In a brief time they were ready, and coming into the bar-room on their way out, Billy said to his host:

"Good-by, Kenyons. If they ask after us, tell them we have gone, and tell 'em we set out to the west. We are goin' east, and that will throw 'em off the trail. We have roused up sich a hornets' nest that there is danger of stings if we tarry any longer. Good-by one and all." And they set off, making all haste to be out of sight as speedily as possible.

CHAPTER XV.

BROADWAY BILLY BAGGED.

At that time the great crowd was at the Queen Anne, and the departure of the trio did not create a stir, as but few were at the hotel to see them off.

These few noted the direction in which they went, of course, but the three were soon out of sight in the darkness, and were seen no more. And it was not for a moment doubted but that they had gone for good.

But no such thing was intended.

Billy led the way up the valley, and almost to the end, and then when it was reasonably

sure that no one was there to see them, he turned, made a detour, and they were soon safely located at the rear of the mine buildings.

"Well, here we are," Billy remarked, dropping the things he had been carrying, "and now the next thing must be something else. What is it to be, Rover?"

"I give it up," was the answer. "You will have to do ther plannin' now, my son. An' I guess it won't puzzle you much ter do it. I tell you what it are, my idee is that you are a whooper from Whooptown."

Billy had to laugh at that, it was in such earnestness and so oddly put.

"Well, there is no time to be fooled away," he declared. "I have got to get back there as soon as I can, and in some rig so's they won't know me. What is it to be, Skinny? Wish we had that Chinnee outfit along with us."

"It wouldn't do to wear it, if you had," Skinny said.

"Why not?"

"There's none of 'em here, and they might use the first one rough."

"That's so, that's so; but that thought so ably expressed, my gay and festive clothespin, gives me an idea. There are quite a few darkies here, and I can black up and be one of them for the time. We have got blacking."

"That will fill the bill, and as all colors are alike in the dark anyhow, it won't make any difference if you don't get it on jest perfect."

"But what are we to be doin' all this time?" the ranger complained.

"Reckon you'll have to stay here and feed Skinny," Billy answered, as he searched for the blacking.

"Waal I reckon not, then," was the response. "I kin let you yopple off this tangle o' beard and hair o' mine, and I'll drop this heur jacket an' show my red shirt an' belt, an' nobody would know me from Adam's cousin. I'm not goin' ter let ye go down thar alone, you bet."

There was firm decision in this, and Billy could not object very strongly.

But they were both opposed to Skinny's going with them, and the more so as they looked upon him as the weakling of the trio.

With the aid of an occasional lighted match they finally had made their preparations, and with a word of cheer to Skinny, set off for the scene of the excitement once more.

They parted company, when half-way to the center of the camp, and went forward in different directions, with a general understanding as to what was to be done, so far as any plans of action could be laid down.

Only a few moments after they had parted there arose a great shouting in the direction of the Queen Anne.

It became louder and more fierce, and the voices of Blue-hand Bart and Texas Sid could be plainly distinguished among the others.

There were curses, ravings, shouts of lynching something or somebody, and at last, with one accord, an angry mob made a dash in the direction of the hotel.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, "but I believe we didn't get away from there any too soon. It looks as though there would have been a lively scrimmage if we had remained. Must see what's going on."

A crowd was gathering fast, men running from every direction to learn what new excitement was on, and Billy fell in with the procession, so to say, and went along with the rest.

Into the bar-room of the Home Sweet Home the mob packed, with the two ruffianly ring-leaders at the head, and there they made a loud demand for Billy.

"Gone!" screamed Texas Sid, when told.

"Gone whar?"

"Sloped out," was the explanation. "Got afraid and dusted. Ask ther boys here if it ain't so."

The statement was supported.

But that did not satisfy. The mob must search the house. And, in spite of all protests, they began their search forthwith.

Not a room but they looked into, and where doors were locked they broke them open. It would have been interesting if the trio had been in their room at this time. Too interesting, perhaps.

But finally it was over, and the mob had to believe it, even against their wish. They were a hideous horde, about twenty of them, all armed to the teeth, and all shouting for the life of the lad who had so humbled their worshiped leaders. Baffled, however, they finally cooled down.

And gradually the camp grew more quiet, and, as time wore on, lights were put out and at last, at a late hour, all was dark.

Broadway Billy had found his man, Parson, and shadowed him to his shanty, and the old ranger, knowing nothing else to do, was acting as guardian over Billy, keeping him in sight from a distance.

Billy knew what he was doing now. He had got hold of important items since coming into the camp in his disguise.

One thing, he had heard a brief talk between Parson and Death-face Darby, a talk that had given him the right cue. They were to meet at a given point an hour after midnight.

Billy meant to be on hand at that meeting, and the only way to insure his being there was to keep his eye on Parson.

Then, finding out important things, perhaps, he would get help, if needed, and scoop the slippery set. He had his eye set upon two features of the events that had crowded to the fore. One was, to find and rescue the missing girl-barber, and the other to get back the stolen horses and punish the thieves, if he could find proof against them.

"And that's what Broadway Billy's business is," he said to himself. "And it will be funny if I can't bring things to a head and do some more waking up here in this sleepy camp. If there isn't a rattling of the dry bones it will not be my fault, with Skinny and Old Rover to back me. You bet!"

He had found a hole in the wall of Parson's shanty through which he could look, and as there was a light within, he could see what was going on.

The man was packing up his belongings, as though he was going, and to stay; and it was pretty plain that he was going that night.

Billy came to the right conclusion, and was sure he had not been far out of the way in his guessings.

He believed that the missing girl was in this fellow's power, and that it was his intention to carry her off and marry her in spite of herself and his rival together.

Finally Parson seemed all ready, and sat down to wait for time. He took up a paper to help him wear away the hour, and glanced at his watch once in every five minutes, at least.

While Billy waited, he fancied he heard a jar on the ground, as by a heavy tread, and looking, saw the outlines of two horses going up the street.

On one was a rider, and it was plain that the feet of the animals were heavily muffled, so that the sound of their hoofs could not be heard. And a second later the old ranger was at Billy's side.

"Hosses," he whispered.

"And maybe ours," said Billy.

"Jest what I think, my son. They're taking 'em off by night."

"Not so much that, but they're the ones this man intends using. Can you follow without discovery, Rover?"

"Humph! I kin foller 'em so's they won't know but I'm their own shadder," was the response.

"Go it, then, and if they are ours, don't lose sight of 'em if you have to follow 'em a month. And don't worry about me; I can take care of Number One."

Without another word the old man stalked away in the direction in which the horses had been taken.

It was about half an hour later when Bob Parson emerged from his shanty.

He had put out the light before opening the door, and now stood on the step for a moment, looking and listening.

Satisfied, he moved away, and was soon going out of the valley at a rapid pace, carrying a bundle on his shoulder, evidently his worldly possessions.

Billy followed, as close as he thought prudent, and as silently as he had ever followed a man in his life. Discovery would mean defeat, and that was not to be considered for a moment.

Barely a hundred yards had he gone, however, when suddenly he was seized by strong hands, and a hand was clapped over his mouth.

Instantly his heart was in his throat. This meant death, as he well knew, and he struggled and fought desperately, but all in vain. He was in the grasp of two powerful men.

He was speedily overcome, gagged, and then bound.

"How now, me duckling?" whispered the voice of Blue-hand Bart.

"You have had yer last bit of fun, you young whelp," added that of Texas Sid.

And Billy fully believed he had, too. There was no hope, so far as he was able to see.

He could offer no reply, gagged, and as time

seemed to be an item of consideration with the two rogues, they proceeded to business hastily.

Picking him up, they carried him off in the direction of the mine, and were soon at the rear of the buildings, where, without loss of time or ceremony, they swung him over into a dark pit and hurried away.

A loud splash immediately followed, and then all was still.

Skinny had witnessed this, and his heart was in his throat as high as Billy's had been. What if that object he had seen thrown into that hole were Billy! The very thought paralyzed him.

While he stood there, undecided, and considering how helpless he was to do anything, alone and in the dark, another shadowy form hastily appeared.

It was that of a man, and Skinny was on the point of hailing him when he saw that he was making straight toward the dark shaft.

A moment he fumbled around there, and then he disappeared over the edge and was gone.

What meant all this? The lean lieutenant was wild with anxiety.

He crept forward to the mouth of the pit.

CHAPTER XVI.

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.

SKINNY found a beam along the edge of the pit, or shaft, and taking hold of it, silently as possible making every move, he leaned over and looked down, listening.

He heard a scraping, rattling sound for a moment, and then all was still.

In another moment a light flashed forth, and he could see what was going on in the dismal hole.

And as he looked he almost let out a scream. There, at the bottom of the hole, with his face turned toward the opening, was his beloved partner, gagged and bound.

The light was a match held in the fingers of a rough-looking fellow who was holding on with his other hand to a rude iron ladder that ran down the side of the old shaft. The next moment this man spoke.

"Thar ye be, I see," he said, "and alive, thank ther Lord. Keep yer head out fer a second, if ye kin, pard, an' I'll have ye."

With that, he threw away the match, and a splash in the water followed.

For some moments there was a good deal of confusion down there, and then the ladder scraped and rattled once more, showing the man had hold of it again.

"Thar," Skinny heard him say, pantingly, "yer life is safe, an' now I'll git holt o' my knife an' free ye, an' ye kin soon climb up ther ladder."

"Sweet pertaters! but that was a narrow squeeze," Billy's voice exclaimed a few seconds later. "I thought it was all up with William, and that's the fact. But, who are you, friend?"

"I'm Joe Grumble," was the answer, "ther feller what Blue-hand bu'sted in ther nose the other night. I vowed I'd git even with him, an' I'm goin' ter do it, too. I knowed what his leetle skeem was, and I had my eyes on him. But, come, fer ther goose ain't no more'n half cooked yet. They're goin' fer that old pard o' yours next."

"Then let's make all haste," cried Billy. "Up with you, and I'll be right at your heels."

Up they scrambled, and Skinny kept still, not wanting to be mistaken for an enemy by the man Grumble, and possibly shot.

As soon as they were out, Billy said:

"My lean pard is here somewhere. We'll find him."

"Right here I am," Skinny answered.

"And let's be off in haste," Billy urged. "I want ter rescue that old man, if it is in the wood."

"We'll git thar, you bet," Grumble assured. "I happen ter know whar they are all headin' fer, and we kin round 'em."

"You know all about it, then?" asked Billy.

"Yas; fact is, I had a hand in some of it, till Bart used me so cussed mean. Since then I've played ther spy an' found out all that I didn't know before. I'm goin' ter spile their game, an' then trust ter you fellers ter keep my neck out o' halter."

"You shall have that favor, you bet," cried Billy. "Only for you I'd be a gone gosling by this time, and I won't forget you. But, what is the plot, anyhow?"

"Waal, fust of all, it was us fellers what stole yer hosses. It was me, Bart, Sid, Death-face, Parson and ther Injun. He got salted, sly as he was at his special line o' work. We has been runnin' that sort o' game fer a long while. And

Sid has been actin' as our drover, ter sell ther stock. That's one chapter, as ther story-books sez.

"Then, next, Parson and Danfort has been wranglin' over that gal barber fer a long time, an' Danfort sort o' had ther inside track, so Parson made up his mind he'd steal her an' carry her off, an' that he'd done. It was done last night, an' she is off in ther hills in ther keepin' of a old hag. Parson is goin' out thar now, and Death-face has gone on with ther hosses. He'll take ther gal, and they will be out o' reach by mornin'—anyhow, so it was planned. But they haven't counted us in."

Billy saw something now. Instead of their putting the girl in one of the shanties, as he had supposed, she had been taken off immediately by other men besides those he had seen. He wondered why he had not thought of that.

"When you was reported as gone, it wasn't believed, and Parson was afraid ye was goin' ter spy on him, fer he was afeard of ye, an' that's ther truth. So he set Blue-hand and Sid ter watch his cabin, an' that's ther way they got onto you. But they didn't know I was watchin' them, an' so it comes about that I was able ter fish ye out of that hole. It was all I could do. I was alone, an' they would 'a' killed me if they had got me, so I had ter take ther chances. It was lucky yer head wasn't bu'sted on ther rocks, but a miss is as good as a mile."

More in detail was given, and so Billy got at all the points. A fuller exposition is not needed here.

The man Grumble led the way and directed their movements, and there was every reason why he should be trusted. Billy had full confidence in him, after what he had done for him; who wouldn't have had?

At last they came to a place in the hills where a light was seen at the opening to a sort of cave, and there in the light stood the old ranger, a prisoner. Before him were Parson, Death-face, Blue-hand and Texas Sid. And it seemed evident that they were preparing to hang the old ranger.

"What's to be done?" asked Billy.

"Wait till they have their hands busy, and their weapons won't be handy, and then we'll scoop 'em," said Grumble. "We'll order 'em ter put up their fins, an' ther fust one what don't do it, let drive at him. An' it must be shoot to kill, too."

This agreed upon in full, they crept nearer, and presently the time was ripe for action. The men were preparing to hang the old ranger, and their hands were engaged, when the three sprung out upon them.

"Up with your hands, you murderers!"

So cried Broadway Billy, and at the sight of him, at least two of the four were too startled to speak. These were Blue-hand and Texas Sid.

Parson, however, was action in an instant. His hand flew to a weapon, but before he could draw it Grumble had dropped him in his tracks. The others were speedily made prisoners.

"A pretty set you are, ain't you?" cried Broadway Billy. "Didn't know that you can't kill me, did ye? This is going to be a dear night's work for you."

"And I told you I'd git square with ye," cried Grumble, shaking his fist at Blue-hand.

More was said, much more, but need not be quoted.

As soon as the old ranger had been released, a search was made of the cave, and in it were found Tilly the Barber and her old woman guard. The girl was released, and the old hag was made a prisoner.

Then a council was called, and a plan of action discussed.

It was decided that they should remain there the rest of the night, and march into the camp with their prisoners by daylight. And so it was fixed.

Next morning, about the hour that the camp was nicely astir, into town marched Billy and his friends, with their prisoners; the latter having been made to carry the body of Parson, a rough stretcher having been constructed for that purpose.

That a rousing excitement was created need not be said. The leading citizens of the camp took the matter in hand, organized a court of Judge Lynch, and proceeded to try the rascals forthwith. The confession of Grumble was heard, and he backed it with proof; and then the story of Broadway Billy. There could be no question as to the guilt of the rascals.

And it was decreed that they should be hanged, every one of them.

There was little delay about that proceeding, either. A rude scaffold was hastily put up, some ropes procured, and the prisoners were led forth.

Broadway Billy did not exactly relish witnessing this sort of thing, but considering how nearly he had come to his death at the hands of two of the villains, he was not so squeamish about it as he would have been otherwise.

Texas Sid was hanged first, and after him went Death-face Darby, and then it remained to serve Blue-hand, the worst of the lot, in the same way. But somehow, just at the last moment, he got his hands free and fought like a tiger. He could have been shot, but that would not do. He must be hanged as the others had been.

In the struggle his clothes were half torn off, and suddenly one of his sleeves giving way at the shoulder, an arm was bared. And immediately, at sight of it, old Roger the Ranger sprung forward with a cry that was almost a scream:

"Dan Manson!" he cried.

The prisoner ceased his struggles and stared at the old ranger, his face more pale than it had been at all.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

"Who am I?" the ranger hissed. "Who, but Roger Watts, the man you wronged years ago. Ha! you dog! I have got you at last, as I knowed I should. This is the man who blasted my life, my boy," turning to Billy.

Explanation was demanded, and the old ranger repeated his story.

"An' thar's no question about ther proof," he concluded, "fer thar it are. Thar's ther scar, ther same as it used to be, an' he can't deny it, he dassen't deny it. Put that rope onto him, pards, an' let me be ther man ter do ther hangin'. It is all I have lived fer all these years."

"An' I knowed it would come ter this, sooner or later," the prisoner cried. "I have knowed you was after me, Roger, I have knowed it awake an' asleep. An' now I can't ax fer mercy, fer I know I wouldn't git it. Hang me, an' let it be over."

"Marcy," the ranger repeated, "marcy fer you? Never on this heur side the grave will yer find it! Put on ther rope, boyees."

It was done, and Dan Manson ended his career at the hands of the man whom he had wronged.

Not much more is to be told.

Billy and his friends were given the freedom of the camp, and enough honor could not be shown them.

The pardoned outlaw, Grumble, was allowed to go, as Billy had promised, and lost no time in getting away. And it was with the resolve to lead a better life.

That same week there was a wedding in the camp, and the happy ones were Tilly Wood and her lover Phil Danfort. There was a joyful time, and Billy danced at the wedding, and he also kissed the bride.

Two weeks the lads spent there, and then, in company with the old ranger, who had made up his mind to go East and end his days near his old home, they set out for Denver, the boys riding their horses, which had been retaken, of course, and the old ranger trudging with them on foot.

A word about Skinny, and we close. He had continued to gain in flesh, until before leaving the camp it had been found necessary to fit him out with a new suit of clothes. He was eating as heartily, and being weighed on the day of setting out, it was found that he weighed two pounds more than Billy! He was a happy boy, and warned Billy never to speak to him again on the subject of thinness.

"You bet I never will, pard, if you hold your own," Billy promised. "But what will I do? I'll have ter call ye Skinny, fer that is yer name; and it's a name that don't fit ye now, not by any means. But when are ye going to stop? If you keep on, by the time we get home you'll be ready to become an alderman, and I'll see that you are nominated for the office, too. Bless your honest little—big heart, you are worth a dozen or two of what you were a few weeks ago, when I was sheddin' salt, sad tears over you away off there in the mountains; hey, Rover?"

THE END.

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